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# Mythological History, Identity Formation, and the Many Faces of Alexander the Great

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Mythological History, Identity Formation, and the Many Faces of Alexander the Great

By James Mayer, 3 May, 2011

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Submitted as an honors project to the Macalester College Classics Department

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The Macedonian cast his eye on him  
 And ground his teeth together  
 And, fuming with rage, uttered the following words:  
 ‘...Do you think you can deceive Alexander by telling  
 These clever fabrications of mythology?’<sup>1</sup>

Alexander the Great was a young king of Macedonia who conquered much of the known world in the fourth century BCE. He marched from Greece to India. He is considered one of the fathers of Hellenism, which is a term that refers to the adoption and spread of Hellenic culture and ideology.<sup>2</sup> Following his death in 323 BCE, much was written about Alexander’s life—both historical and popular. In one of the Greek romances written about Alexander (quoted above), Alexander himself claims to reject mythology as a valid source for historical study; however, even the most fanciful Alexander narratives can be valuable historical sources and much can be learned from mythology and folklore. Alexander has appeared in stories from places as far flung as Iceland and Indonesia, and each retelling of the Alexander narrative adds an additional layer of reinterpretation to the story.<sup>3</sup> In addition to relating his conquest of Persia and his march to India, the many narratives of Alexander’s life also tell of his invention of a

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudo-Callisthenes and Richard Stoneman, *The Greek Alexander Romance* (London, England; New York, NY, USA: Penguin Books, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Hellenism is an extremely difficult term to define, and scholars debate its origins. For my purposes, it is important to note that Alexander is a figure who quickly becomes associated with Hellenism, and soon after his death people connect his conquests with a major advancement in the process of bringing Greek culture to the wider world. As a working understanding of Hellenism which I will use in this paper, see Gruen: “The Greeks, secure and content with their legacy, showed little inclination to learn the languages or embrace the cultures of peoples who had come under their authority...They took their superiority for granted...Hellenic culture, as the stamp of the ascendant classes in many of the cities of the Near East, held widespread attraction and appeal. ...The Process of ‘Hellenization’ is mysterious and obscure, not easily defined or demonstrated.” Erich S. Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), xiii-xiv.

<sup>3</sup> Scholars have explored the various Alexander myths in some depth. An overview of the many sources about Alexander can be found in Richard Stoneman, *Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), and there are several works which take multiple myths and analyze them together, such as Himanshu Prabha Ray and Daniel T. Potts, *Memory as History: The Legacy of Alexander in Asia*, Aryan Books International, (2007). Many works deal with a single source and analyze it without respect to other Alexander myths.

diving suit, exploration of the Land of Darkness, conversion to Judaism, and debate with the naked Brahman philosophers in India, to name just a few myths that have entered the corpus.

The purpose of this paper is to explore several of these retellings and to place them in their social and political context in order to see how different peoples used the figure of Alexander and his story to fulfill their historical needs. I will examine texts created by three different communities from the late antique and medieval periods in order to demonstrate that although Alexander was a pagan, Macedonian conqueror, his personality and actions have been reinterpreted to impart themes important to the various communities that created myths about his life. Specifically, I argue that communities reinterpret the mythical narratives of Alexander the Great to redefine their identities in the face of catastrophic change. First, I will address several Hellenistic Jewish versions of the Alexander narrative, then I will examine two Byzantine Orthodox Christian sources, and lastly I will explore a Persian Islamic interpretation. As I analyze myths from these different communities, I will address several questions raised by the texts. How do the descendants of peoples with whom Alexander came into contact (and often conquered) re-tell the story? How is Alexander portrayed and how do later authors use his story? Why do so many groups choose to redefine themselves by using Alexander the Great? Although the historicity of ancient sources are often difficult to evaluate, especially due to questions of chronology, redactions, and the sources' historical methodology, much can still be learned from their study.<sup>4</sup> A comparison of the various myths of the Alexander narrative to the “actual events” is not my goal; I do not seek to analyze myths with the intention of finding a “kernel of

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<sup>4</sup> For example, in the case of the *Alexander Romances*, which will be discussed in detail later in the paper, many of their sources are removed from the events they describe both geographically and chronologically. In addition, many of their sources no longer survive, which makes evaluation of their accuracy difficult.

historical truth,” a fact disguised amongst fiction.<sup>5</sup> Rather, a close reading of the sources can demonstrate how narratives were reworked to suit the historical needs of their authors and readers, especially in response to times of crisis. I will explore the intersection of myth, history, and identity to demonstrate how and why different communities from around the eastern Mediterranean used the figure of Alexander the Great to redefine their roles and relationships in a changing world.

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<sup>5</sup> Irad Malkin, *The Returns of Odysseus: Colonization and Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 5.

## Chapter One: Historical Theory and Alexander the Great

### *Advances in the Study of History*

How can historians connect mythology with history and identity formation? These questions have attracted much attention from modern scholars, and many historians have theorized about the connections between mythology, history, and identity.<sup>6</sup> The construction of group identity—whether active and conscious, or gradual and organic—is a phenomenon that is closely linked to power, and is a key connection between perceptions of the past and understandings of the present. As Duncan Bell points out, identity is fundamentally linked to other people:

Historical representation is built in to the formation and constant re-negotiation of identity, for this never-ending process requires the location and embedding of the self or group within a matrix of other fluid identities, all of which are likewise partially framed by and constituted through temporally extended representations of themselves in relation to others.<sup>7</sup>

One manner in which to accomplish such distinction from the “other” is through the construction and interpretation of historical narratives. Distinct perceptions of the past denote distinct societies, cultures, nations, or other groups.

Almost all the scholars who explore identity formation use the terms ‘history’ and ‘memory’ to talk about how the past is perceived and utilized. They explore how histories play

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<sup>6</sup> Much scholarship on theoretical connections between myth, history, identity, and memory is based on the study of modern nationalism. However, I find much of the theory is applicable to the history of the identity formation discussed in this paper. For myth, history, and identity, see E. J. Hobsbawm and T. O. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); on the construction of community, see also Benedict R. O’G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London; New York: Verso, 1991); and for community and culture, especially the concept of ethnicity, see Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 2000) and Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford, UK; New York: B. Blackwell, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> Bell, “Mythsapes: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 54, no. 1 (2003), 70. “[M]emory acts as a powerful cohesive force, binding the disparate members of a nation together: it demarcates the boundary between Them and Us, delineating the national self from the foreign, alien other” *ibid.* 67.

into the identities constructed by different groups, and how different interpretations of history—either from within one group or between two groups—of the same event interact. On a more basic level, many scholars attempt to answer the question ‘what is history?’<sup>8</sup> Explorations of the Alexander narratives call for further study of the relationships between history, myth and identity. In order to understand the group identities constructed by the communities who wrote myths about Alexander the Great, one must be able to understand how history is created, accessed, and utilized. *We* must attempt to answer the complicated question, “what is history?”

#### The ‘Literary Turn’ and Postmodern Historiography: 1960-1980

History has become increasingly difficult to define because of recent advances in the field of historiography. Starting in the 1960s and 1970s, literary critics such as Hayden White, amongst others, began to challenge the validity of the traditional claim of historians to a privileged understanding of the “truth” about the past, in what is called the ‘literary turn.’<sup>9</sup> These theorists argued that everything that we consider ‘history’ is narrated by somebody and is therefore subject to the biases and interpretation that results from filtering a narrative through a narrator. As Jeffery Olick wrote of this historiographical development, “there is no primal, unmediated experience that can be recovered.”<sup>10</sup> Parts are left out of the narrative; the narrator interprets events; and the narrator can only access certain stories, memories, and myths—he or she is not omniscient. No historical narrative can ever relate the absolute truth of events as they

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<sup>8</sup> For a concise and thorough overview of the discussion over the nature of history, and the history of the discipline, see Mark T. Gilderhus, *History and Historians: A Historiographical Introduction* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), and Gilderhus, *History and Historians: A Historiographical Introduction*, chapter 7.

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, "Social Memory Studies: From "Collective Memory" to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices," *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998), 105, 110.

actually happened.<sup>11</sup> As White argues, history is just like fiction, except it claims to contain some kernel of truth about how events actually happened in the past.<sup>12</sup> Since the work of literary and critical theorists began to challenge the notion that historians seek to uncover an absolutely accurate retelling of the past, many historians have shifted their focus to instead seek to understand the past, rather than retell the past “as it happened.”

At around the same time that White and others were writing about the subjective nature of truth in the study of history, some scholars began to re-envision how memory functions and how it interacts with history. Many historians use the term collective memory as a catchall to refer to the way in which communities envision their pasts. As the post-modernists questioned history’s claim to ‘truth’ in the late twentieth century, alternative approaches to exploring the past grew in popularity. Following the ‘literary turn,’ memory became the postmodern historian’s version of “truth;” Jeffrey Olick, a historian of the study of memory, wrote about the rise of post-modern history: “history’s epistemological claim is devalued in favor of memory’s meaningfulness.”<sup>13</sup> Facts about the past were no longer the preferred currency of historians; instead, scholars sought to study memories of the past.

“Collective memory” and “historical memory” are challenging terms with often-vague theoretical implications. Maurice Halbwachs, a sociologist whose work on collective memory gained popularity shortly after Hayden White wrote *Metahistory*, created a groundbreaking

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<sup>11</sup> For a fantastic exploration of the subjective nature of historiography, see the examination of the creation and implementation of history in Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> “The difference between ‘history’ and ‘fiction’ resides in the fact that the historian ‘finds’ his stories, while the fiction writer ‘invents’ his. This conception of the historian’s task, however, obscures the extent to which ‘invention’ also plays a part in the historian’s operations. The same event can serve as a different kind of element of many different historical stories, depending on the role it is assigned in a specific motific characterization of the set to which it belongs.” White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*,

<sup>13</sup> Olick and Robbins, “Social Memory Studies: From “Collective Memory” to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices,” 105-140, 110.

approach to the subject of social memory studies. He distinguished between historical collective memory and autobiographical memory.<sup>14</sup> For Halbwachs, historical collective memory is not a memory of an event directly experienced, but is instead “stimulated in indirect ways...In this case, the past is stored and interpreted by institutions,” while autobiographical memory is personal and experientially based. Historical collective memory, according to Halbwachs, is maintained and constructed through social, communal events, such as memorial parades and festivals—essentially, through practice.<sup>15</sup> However, Halbwachs sees memory as fundamentally “presentist”—it is shaped only by the needs of the present, and therefore could not contain much continuity between generations. Yet, memories about most historical events do seem to have some continuous narrative core to them—the Germans did not win World War I in one generation’s version of the past and then lose the war in a subsequent generation’s interpretation. Obviously, Halbwachs does not argue that stories become inverted from generation to generation; however, scholars have begun to problematize the predominance of memory in historical study, as will be discussed below. Halbwachs’s trailblazing work in the study of memory and collective memory served to direct scholarly approaches to identity formation for the next several decades and still informs academic discourse on the subject to this day.

#### Theorizing Nationalism and Group Identity: 1980-1995

In the 1980s, with the increasing rise of nationalism and the decline of the Soviet Union, many scholars turned their attention to group identity and identity construction.<sup>16</sup> One such

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<sup>14</sup> Maurice Halbwachs and Lewis A. Coser, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 23.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 24.

<sup>16</sup> See especially Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, and the seminal book on modern nationalism, Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, which although do not directly

scholar was Anthony Smith, who approached the topic from anthropological and sociological perspectives, and who discussed group identity and community with an eye towards explaining the origins of nationalism and nations. He looked to culture and memory as key characteristics of group identity. In his work, Smith is especially interested in the role of ethnicity in defining and maintaining group identity, and his approach to cultural analysis and typology is extremely informative in looking at more narrowly defined communities, especially national and proto-national communities.<sup>17</sup> As a follower of the post-modernist historians like Hayden White, Smith does not seek to uncover the historical, “true” stories behind a group’s identity. Instead, he explores how the stories a community tells about its past serve to construct and shape its identity.

Smith’s focus on ‘*ethnie*,’ which he defines as the “collective cultural units and sentiments of previous eras,” brings the discussion of group identity out of the context of modern nationalism, which allows for more flexibility in interpretation so that I can use his ideas when exploring pre-modern contexts.<sup>18</sup> Smith approaches *ethnie* through four facets—“the ‘core’ of ethnicity...resides in this quartet of “myths, memories, values, and symbols.”<sup>19</sup> All of Smith’s four facets look to the past for legitimacy or validity. Therefore, the importance of history in creating and maintaining ethnicity, and, by extension, group identity, is especially highlighted. Smith argues that identity is a sense of community based on history and culture, rather than on collectivity or on the concept of ideology. This means that members of a community view their

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influence my reading of the Alexander narratives I study in this paper, strongly influence almost all of the modern theorists who explore notions of collective identity that I draw upon.

<sup>17</sup> Duncan Bell, "Introduction: Violence and Memory," *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 38, no. 2 (2009), 345, 354; Anthony D. Smith, *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1995), 24.

<sup>18</sup> Although Smith talks about ethnicity and *ethnie* with an eye towards connecting nationalism and ethnicity, his approach to analyzing identity and societies is a useful framework to apply to my analysis of my own material. For more on *ethnie*, see Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, 13.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 15.

identity as a part of the community through common interpretations of the community's past (its heritage), rather than through some ideological or *a priori* essence of community identity.<sup>20</sup>

History and myth interact to maintain and construct identity through what Smith calls the *mythomoteur*:

As they emerge from the collective experiences of successive generations, the myths coalesce and are edited into chronicles, epics, and ballads, which combine the cognitive maps of the community's history and situation with poetic metaphors of its sense of dignity and identity. The fused and elaborated myths provide an overall framework of meaning for the ethnic community, a *mythomoteur*, which 'makes sense' of its experiences and defines its 'essence.' Without a *mythomoteur* a group cannot define itself to itself or to others, and cannot inspire or guide collective action.<sup>21</sup>

The stories a community tells about its past are influenced by the community's identity and at the same time serve to shape the identity itself. The narratives created by groups of Jews, Orthodox Byzantines, and Persians about Alexander the Great were products of their pasts, but they also simultaneously helped to further shape these communities' identities as they responded to crises.

Smith saw group identity as a uniting factor for communities, and placed a special focus on how myths and symbols play into a communities' perception of its identity and past. Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger elucidate Smith's simple understanding of the relationship between myth and history with their approach to nationalism and identity construction in their seminal work on nationalism, *The Invention of Tradition*, which was published shortly before Smith's *The Ethnic Origin of Nations*. In their book, Hobsbawm and Ranger posited that many supposedly timeless aspects of a community's identity are actually recent creations, and they cautioned against accepting historical memory and historical traditions at face value. While

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 14.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 24-5. Though Smith refers to the mythomoteurs of ethnies, the connection between myth-symbols and identity holds true for multi-ethnic communities. Where there are commonly understood systems of meaning and symbols, there is some type of community, whether it is political, religious, or class-based. For more discussion of mythomoteurs see pages 57-68.

Smith and many other theorists of nationalism and group identity see clear links between a community's history and its present identity, Hobsbawm and Ranger problematize the very historicity of a perceived tradition. Smith is content to deal with myths in the distant past of communal histories, and he does not spend much time exploring how myths are created and incorporated into group identity. Hobsbawm and Ranger bring myths into the recent past as well as distant past, and they argue that many historical traditions are "invented traditions," and are not as old as they seem.<sup>22</sup> For example, one of the essays in *The Invention of Tradition* analyzes the ritual and pageantry of the British monarchy to demonstrate how the British people viewed it as "nothing more than primitive magic, a hollow sham," in the first part of the nineteenth century.<sup>23</sup> It was perceived as new and unfounded in any traditional behavior surrounding the British monarchy. The author points out that now, however, observers describe the ceremonial surrounding the monarchy as having "all the pageantry and grandeur of a thousand-year-old tradition."<sup>24</sup> Invented traditions are incorporated, either actively or organically, into a communities' perception of its past and therefore its identity.

Not only are traditions invented, and cultural roots artificially planted, but also, as Hobsbawm argues in his introduction, "[Traditions are invented] more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which 'old' traditions have been designed."<sup>25</sup> Smith points out that *ethnie* change their forms or identities in the face of crisis as well, by either absorbing or assimilating other 'myth-symbol' complexes into their

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<sup>22</sup> "Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past." Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* 1.

<sup>23</sup> Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, 102; Joane Nagel, Eric Hobsbawm, and Terence Ranger, "Review of the Invention of Tradition," *American Journal of Sociology* 90, no. 5 (1985), 1096-1097.

<sup>24</sup> Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, 102

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 5.

own.<sup>26</sup> Communities of Jews, Orthodox Byzantine Christians, and Persians all experienced catastrophic change around the same time that they undertook to re-work the Alexander the Great narratives. It is, therefore, no surprise that all three groups adapt traditions in order to redefine their identities, and that these traditions take the form of myths.

### Myth, History, and Memory: 1995-Present

Further developments in the connection between myth and history have led me to the theoretical frameworks and terms I utilize in my exploration of the stories told about Alexander the Great. In the 1990s and 2000s, scholars continued to explore the role of myth in history and they delved into the complex and nuanced relationships between history, myth, identity, and memory. Following in the footsteps of Hayden White, Israeli scholar Irad Malkin wrote in his discussion of the myths of Odysseus from the *Odyssey*, “We are concerned here with the function of myth in history. Rather than searching for the history behind the myth or examining the role of myth in ancient historiography, I treat myth as a mediating function.”<sup>27</sup> Following Malkin’s lead, I see myth as a channel that allows communities to reinterpret their identity and perceptions of history. In my exploration of the Alexander narratives, I too attempt to explore the role of myth as mediator—in this case I see myth as mediator between past and present, between reality and the ideal. I do not seek to uncover the ‘historical truth’ behind the myths. For example, I do not expect to find out whether or not Alexander actually ever conquered a tribe of fairies in the name of Islam (he probably did not), but I do wish to explore how one Persian retelling of the Alexander narrative, which features Alexander as Islamic conqueror, reflects the

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<sup>26</sup> For more on demographic versus cultural crises and the role of crisis in communal traditions, see Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, 16.

<sup>27</sup> Malkin, *The Returns of Odysseus: Colonization and Ethnicity*, 5-6.

historical setting in which the myth was created and the historical need that the myth fulfilled.

While Malkin looks at the connection between colonization and myth, I will examine the connection between myth and identity.

Duncan Bell, whose work on memory, history, and myth has greatly influenced my approach to the Alexander narratives I study in this paper, responded to the developments of the 1980s and 1990s. He cautioned against the accuracy of the term “historical memory,” so widely employed by historians before him and discussed above. Bell theorizes the distinction between memory and myth, and states, “the careless employment of the term ‘memory’ results not only in...confusion” but also can obscure the phenomenon through which “collective remembrance can actually run against the grain of the dominant narrative (or ‘governing mythology’).” Historians all too often use the terms ‘memory’ and ‘collective memory’ as shorthand for other phenomena, and this laziness leads to misinterpretation and misunderstanding—Bell argues that unclear terminology silences the ability of memory to function as a counter-hegemonic force.<sup>28</sup> He specifically names Anthony Smith, whom I discussed above, as a scholar whose work often confuses collective memory with what Bell would call a myth.<sup>29</sup> Bell seeks to draw distinctions between memory and myth—he asserts that memory is only experiential, and that it enters into the communal conception of the past through mythologizing in a space known as the “mythscape.”<sup>30</sup> Bell argues that one cannot ‘remember’ (physically) an event that he/she did not actually experience. For example, to use the terms ‘historical memory’ or ‘communal memory’ to describe how modern American Jewish youth envision and understand the *Shoah* is misleading, because what the young Americans ‘remember’ about the *Shoah* is not what they

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<sup>28</sup> Duncan Bell, "Mythscape: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity," 63, 66.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 65, 70-1.

<sup>30</sup> “Mythscape,’ the temporally and naturally extended discursive realm in which the myths of the nation are forged, transmitted, negotiated, and reconstructed constantly. Through employing the idea of a mythscape, we can relate memory and mythology to each other in a theoretically profitable way,” ibid. 64.

actually experienced in the 1930s and 1940s (because they obviously were not alive), but what their community has integrated into its mythical past. Following Bell's powerfully constructed theoretical framework, I do not seek to deal with "memory" in my study of the many narratives written about Alexander the Great because, according to Bell's definitions, the stories I analyze about Alexander are myths, not memories (even collective/historical memories).<sup>31</sup>

Bell's mythscape, where memory and myth meet, is where myths—national and communal—are constructed. According to Bell, a myth should be understood as:

a story that simplifies, dramatizes and selectively narrates the story of a nation's past and its place in the world, its historical eschatology: a story that elucidates its contemporary meaning through (re)constructing its past. Furthermore, myths...subsume all of the various events, personalities, traditions, artefacts [sic] and social practices that (self) define the nation and its relation to the past, present, and future. Myths are constructed, they are shaped, whether by deliberate manipulation and intentional action, or perhaps through the particular resonance of works of literature and art.<sup>32</sup>

Bell introduces two types of myths: governing and subaltern. Governing myths serve to reinforce a dominant narrative and identity by simplifying and attempting to decontest inherently contested symbols, narratives, and representations. Subaltern myths challenge the governing myths and are "capable of generating their own traditions and stories."<sup>33</sup> The effectiveness of myths as they relate to identity construction is dependent on the narrative structure of the myths. Although Bell speaks of nationalists and nationalism in his discussion of narration and myth, his theory in this section holds true for other types of communities. Regardless of the type of community (whether national, political, religious, or other), people need to be able to tell a

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<sup>31</sup> This is not to say that the theoretical frameworks developed and deployed by scholars like Halbwachs and Smith are useless. Although they are quick to use the term 'memory' when talking about the past, their exploration of the importance of history in identity construction is still very relevant. They also see the significance of myths and fiction in what often passes for history.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 75.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 74.

particular type of story about the community and its importance, a story that resonates with the people emotionally, that glorifies the community, and that is easily transmitted and absorbed.<sup>34</sup>

When talking about national identity construction, Bell says,

The construction of stories about identity, origin, history, and community is crucial...Representational practices are thus inherently bound up in the process of national identity formation: to mould a national identity...it is necessary to have an understanding of oneself as located in a temporally extended narrative, and in order to be able to locate one as such, nationalist discourse must be able to represent the unfolding of time in a way that the nation assumes a privileged and valorized role. Representation and discourse should therefore be seen as constitutive features of nationalism.<sup>35</sup>

Not only must the narrative created be simple and easy to transmit and understand, the narrative dimensions that connect myth to identity are both temporal and spatial. In both governing and subaltern myths, time is often warped into a linear projection of the past and present; events fall somewhere onto the linear, mythical timeline of an imagined historical progression. Spatially, events are imagined to occur in an “idealized” and “bounded” territory. As Bell puts it:

Time and place combine and are encoded in nationalist representational strategies, shaping the feelings of community and the construction of an inside/outside distinction, framing national identity in terms of a story about history and (a specific, often imagined) location... [the mythscape] is grounded in institutions and shaped by ever-present and evolving power-relations.<sup>36</sup>

It is important to remember that the mythscape is not a “reified construct, a narrative without a narrator,” precisely because myths are grounded in institutions and evolving power relations.<sup>37</sup>

We must turn to analyzing the Alexander narratives with Bell’s distinctions in mind—his approach to myth and history connects power to identity construction and serves as a theoretical jumping-off point for my exploration of myth, history, and identity.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 67.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 69.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 76.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 75-6.

While exploring the many narratives about Alexander the Great, I will follow Hobsbawm and Bell, amongst others, in order to make the connections between history, myth, and identity clear. Jewish narratives about Alexander challenge the dominant narrative, what Bell calls the “governing myth,” while I argue that the Orthodox Byzantine and Persian reinterpretations that I study are part of an organic effort to invent tradition and (re)construct a governing myth. The myths I explore offer a glimpse into Bell’s mythscape. The stories about Alexander created by these groups are examples of singular narratives vying for dominance with other myths in the communal mythscape. The final governing or subaltern myth created by the larger Jewish, Orthodox Byzantine, and Persian communities does not necessarily reflect the analysis of the myths I give here, because these myths are the products of smaller communities within larger groups. Through the confluence of myth and history, we can better understand the relationship between myth and history, and identity and history.

### *Heroes, Myth, and Identity*

The importance of “great men” or heroes for communal identity construction is a well-explored phenomenon.<sup>38</sup> These figures and the stories told about them frame a community’s consciousness, worldview, and perception of the past. They are seen as exemplars of the community ideal and they attain (semi-) divine status in the worldviews of those who are imagined as their descendants. As Duncan Bell theorized in “Mythscales,” the stories told about

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<sup>38</sup> For example, see Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*; Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*; and especially Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* for more on founder figures and communal identity. Early historians viewed the hero as the driving force behind history, for example, see Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, (London; New York: J.M. Dent & Co.; E.P. Dutton & co., 1908).

a community's past must be "easily digestible."<sup>39</sup> Constructing myths around the stories of heroic figures is a straightforward means to streamline a complex history into a simple and instructive narrative. Heroic figures carry preconceived associations that can be easily attached to new narratives, and the form of the epic or other heroic narrative is an entertaining and easily memorable structure to transmit and perpetuate understandings of the community's past. Heroic narratives often fit into Bell's "idealized" and "bounded" territory and simplify complex histories into an imagined, linear progression.<sup>40</sup>

Every community has heroes that hold positions of special significance in their communal consciousness. These figures are often founder figures, explorers, conquerors, kings, and/or warriors. Mythology and folklore from around the world are filled with characters similar to Alexander—men (because they are almost always men) who establish cities, travel the world, investigate the unknown, and dominate the "other." For the Greeks, Herakles and Odysseus stand out as meaningful figures for comparison with Alexander.<sup>41</sup> The Jews have an ambivalent relationship with the figure of Alexander; many of the foundational narratives involving Alexander serve to negotiate Jewish position in a world ruled by others—especially Hellenistic or Roman kings.<sup>42</sup> Figures such as Moses and Solomon make interesting comparisons for Alexander. For the Persians, Alexander is also a problematic figure. He toppled the Achaemenid Empire and defeated Darius III; however, he also appears alongside the great

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<sup>39</sup> Bell, "Mythscapes: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity," 63-81, 67.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 76.

<sup>41</sup> For more on Odysseus and Herakles as founder figures, see Carol Dougherty, *The Raft of Odysseus: The Ethnographic Imagination of Homer's Odyssey* (Oxford, UK; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), and Malkin, *The Returns of Odysseus: Colonization and Ethnicity*.

<sup>42</sup> For a succinct discussion of the role of Alexander in the Jewish imagination, see chapter three in Stoneman, *Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend*.

Persian rulers in the famous Persian epic the *Shahnameh*.<sup>43</sup> Like the Jewish use of the Macedonian king, the Persian portrayals of Alexander reflect their ambivalent relationship with Alexander. Persians sometimes compare Alexander to biblical heroes such as Solomon, and Persian heroes like Kaykhusraw. Each myth I analyze in this paper offers just one approach to interpreting Alexander the Great from these communities.

Alexander is an especially intriguing hero-figure because of his social, political, cultural, and historical context. He is the founder of the city of Alexandria in modern Egypt, one of the most important cities in antiquity. Furthermore, Alexander conquered and unified vast tracts of land and disparate and unique peoples—many communities in antiquity experienced Macedonian rule, which made Alexander a common figure in many different peoples' historical narratives. His exploration of the fantastic and unknown shrouded his historical accomplishments in mystery, and allowed many groups to claim descent (either political or cultural) from him, and his fame as king allowed groups to look to him as law-giver and ideal ruler. These characteristics led many communities to create myths about Alexander that are comparable to other founder figures, including the traveller-heroes and city-founders Herakles and Odysseus, and the ideal leaders Moses and Solomon. Why do so many different communities portray Alexander as a heroic figure in their historical and mythical narratives? In this section, I will specifically explore the importance of heroic city founders, explorers and conquerors, and law givers/ideal rulers. I will also demonstrate how Alexander the Great fits into each category as an archetypal example to explore why so many communities have incorporated Alexander's narrative into their histories.

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<sup>43</sup> Firdawsi and Reuben Levy, *The Epic of the Kings: Shah-Nama, the National Epic of Persia* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1967), see also the discussion in Stoneman, *Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend*, chapter two.

## Heroic Founder Figures

City founders have been incorporated into historical and mythical accounts of the past for as long as people have settled in urban areas. The ancient Greeks especially concerned themselves with founder figures, and a large amount of modern scholarship about city-founders has addressed ancient Greek examples.<sup>44</sup> Greek cities looked to founder figures, both real and imagined, to place themselves in the framework of an expanding world as Greeks ventured continually farther from home, especially during the extensive colonization that lasted from the Archaic to the Hellenistic periods.<sup>45</sup> Narratives told about the city's founder, or about the event of the city's foundation allowed ancient Greeks and others to tie themselves into the Mediterranean world and to establish connections with other communities through shared myths, symbols, and heroic founders. Irad Malkin argues that myths defined communities and connected them to their territory, both temporally and spatially, in relation to the larger world.<sup>46</sup> They paved the way for settlement on land conceived as "empty" and lent antiquity to territorial claims.<sup>47</sup>

As examples of typical mythological hero figures, Odysseus and Herakles deserve extra attention. According to the Greek epic poem the *Odyssey*, on his travels home from Troy,

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<sup>44</sup> See especially the work of Irad Malkin, specifically *The Returns of Odysseus: Colonization and Ethnicity*, and *Myth and Territory in the Spartan Mediterranean*.

<sup>45</sup> See Malkin's discussion of periodization, and especially his exploration of the notions of "periphery" and "center," and his claim that Greek colonies were not seen as "secondary" or "lesser," in *ibid.* 1-3. Rejecting the modern notion of "secondary" colonies and more important "mother cities" alters the meaning of a city claiming a heroic founder figure. Colonies did not just simply claim a hero as a founder in order to place them at the same level as their mother cities, though this was sometimes the case. The use of heroes as founder figures in the ancient Greek world was more complicated than a modern understanding of colonization allows.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 6-7.

<sup>47</sup> See for example, Malkin's discussion of Spartan colonization of Libya and the role of the hero Menelaos in "opening up" the land, *ibid.* 47. For "empty lands," see 96-97.

Odysseus explored much of the western Mediterranean and encountered many new and strange peoples and lands. In the years of the Classical period of ancient Greek history, many cities throughout the western Mediterranean adopted Odysseus as their mythical founder. They rarely took their stories about Odysseus from the ‘original text’ of Homer’s *Odyssey*; instead, they took myths from alternate versions of his story.<sup>48</sup> For example, according to Hesiod in *Theogony*, the Etruscans of northern Italy were descended from Odysseus, and both Greeks and Etruscans accepted this heroic interloper into Etruscan genealogy.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Herakles and his heroic descendants found their way into the genealogies of communities from all over the Mediterranean. For example, the Spartans claimed to be descended from both the Homeric hero Menelaos and the heroic descendants of Herakles, the so-called Herakleidai. When the Spartans colonized Cyrene, in modern-day Libya, they used myths about both the Herakleidai and Menelaos to explain their presence and power in a new land amongst new peoples. Eventually, the colony of Cyrene itself came up with its own mythological foundation story and mythological founder-heroes to explain its existence.<sup>50</sup> Tellingly, even the Macedonians claimed direct descent from Herakles.<sup>51</sup> As we shall see, cities and communities from around the eastern Mediterranean incorporate Alexander the Great into their genealogies by creating and subverting myths about him, just as people had done for centuries with figures like Odysseus and Herakles.

Alexander the Great fits into the framework of city-founders discussed above because in many ways he is the quintessential city founder. Arguably the most important accomplishment of Alexander’s short life was his foundation of the city of Alexandria in modern day Egypt.

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<sup>48</sup> Malkin, *The Returns of Odysseus: Colonization and Ethnicity*, 159.

<sup>49</sup> Hesiod, *Hesiod*, translated by Glenn W. Most, Vol. I (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 101-118. I owe this reference to Malkin, *The Returns of Odysseus: Colonization and Ethnicity*, 161.

<sup>50</sup> For Sparta’s founder-heroes, see Irad Malkin, *Myth and Territory in the Spartan Mediterranean* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), chapters 1 and 2; for the special case of Cyrene, see chapters 6 and 7.

<sup>51</sup> Stoneman, *Alexander the Great : A Life in Legend*, 3.

Located to the west of the Nile River delta, Alexandria was one of the most famous cities in the world for thousands of years, and was an immediate cultural, political, and economic hub of the Mediterranean world. Indeed, in the *Alexander Romances*, Alexander's quest for immortality is only fulfilled through his association with the famous city: "You shall live [in this city] / For all time, dead and yet not dead. / The city you have built shall be your tomb."<sup>52</sup> As the region's most important city, Alexandria became an important site for retellings of Alexander's life story. The inhabitants of the city looked increasingly to the founder figure of the Macedonian king in order to explain and define their own positions within the framework of the cosmopolitan city—to other Alexandrians, and to those outside of Alexandria. As different communities drew on their interpretations of his narrative in order to negotiate their ever-evolving relationships, Alexander became a contested hero.

Of the Jewish, Orthodox Byzantine Christian, and Persian myths explored below, the authors of the Jewish myths are the most explicit in their manipulation of the Alexander narratives in order to exploit Alexander's role as founder of Alexandria. According to Josephus in *Jewish Antiquities*, the Jews of Alexandria received their civil privileges from Alexander himself, though modern scholars tend to follow Josephus's claim in *Against Apion* and agree that the privileges were actually granted later, under Ptolemy I.<sup>53</sup> Regardless, there was a large Jewish population in Alexandria during the Hellenistic and Roman Imperial periods, and this community looked to the distant past to explain their current position in Alexandria. These Jews and their diasporic coreligionists often looked to myths about Alexander to find a place for

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<sup>52</sup> Pseudo-Callisthenes, *The Greek Alexander Romance*, 68.

<sup>53</sup> Flavius Josephus and H. St J. Thackeray, *Against Apion* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press; W. Heinemann, 1934), 2.33; and Flavius Josephus et al, "Jewish Antiquities," in Vol. 6 (Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press; Heinemann, 1926), XI.304, XI.347.

themselves in an overwhelmingly gentile world, just as many other communities look to founder figures to define their place in the world.<sup>54</sup>

Myths told about Alexander as a Hellenistic city-founder hero often follow the same form as earlier myths told about Archaic and Classical Greek founder figures. He is linked not just with Alexandria in modern Egypt, his most famous accomplishment, but also with cities all over the eastern Mediterranean, and these cities connect themselves to Alexander through mythological stories. He is connected with the foundation of the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus, Asia Minor (one of the seven wonders of the ancient world) through mythical narrative, and he is connected with the foundation of cities in modern day Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan.<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, many cities that Alexander did not found were named after him, since his successors continued to name cities after him after his death.<sup>56</sup> His heroic status and worldwide fame made him a sought after and powerful figure for a community to include in its mythical genealogy.

### Heroic Explorers and Conquerors

Heroic city founders are often also involved in the exploration of strange places and the subjugation of fantastic peoples. Communities use city founders to construct false antiquity and to create a narrative in which the agency for city creation is transferred to them. Heroic explorers and conquerors serve to legitimize and explain colonization—both to the colonizers

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<sup>54</sup> For more on Alexandrian Jews, see chapter 2 of this paper.

<sup>55</sup> For a fascinating modern example of a community claiming descent from Alexander, see Ory Amitay, *From Alexander to Jesus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>56</sup> For a recent overview of the many cities that claim Alexander as founder, and the veracity of their claims, see P. M. Fraser, *Cities of Alexander the Great* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1996).

and to the colonized. Additionally, myths about heroic travelers, as Irad Malkin and Carol Dougherty have theorized, allow communities to reimagine their understanding of the world and their own identities in the face of change. Specifically, Malkin discusses the importance of Greek *nostoi* myths, which are myths about Greek travelers (“returning heroes”) who leave “the wondrous and terrible lands of the Beyond” and return to the familiar. According to Malkin, these myths about heroes who traversed the boundaries of the known and unknown, civilized and uncivilized “provided cultural and ethnic mediations with non-Greeks and, once integrated, often came to provide the terms of self-perception for native populations.”<sup>57</sup> Myths about crossing boundaries, encountering the strange and unfamiliar, and returning to tell the story served as important mediators of the identity both of the community doing the exploring, as well as the people who lived in the formerly strange and unfamiliar land.

Carol Dougherty explores the role of travel in Greek myths, specifically in the *Odyssey*, and its relationship to identity construction. According to Dougherty, travel is closely connected to the accumulation and dissemination of knowledge, and therefore, “spatial and travel metaphors are especially useful for describing and negotiating periods of transformation and transition, both personal and cultural.”<sup>58</sup> As a community experiences cultural, social, economic, or other major changes, the figurative connection between travelling to new lands and the new situation confronting the community is often utilized (either consciously or subconsciously) to mediate the transition. In this manner, Alexander is a perfect heroic figure for a community to use to deal with change—he was a traveler who explored most of the known (and unknown) world, and he “returned” to the familiar lands of Mesopotamia to tell the story.

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<sup>57</sup> Malkin, *The Returns of Odysseus: Colonization and Ethnicity*, 1.

<sup>58</sup> Dougherty, *The Raft of Odysseus: The Ethnographic Imagination of Homer's Odyssey*, 5.

As Dougherty suggests, the relationship between the community of the traveler and the communities that are “discovered” is ambivalent: “Are these travelers ambassadors of certainty or doubt? Do they confirm or destabilize notions of cultural identity? Do they make room for the ‘other,’ or do they put it in its place?”<sup>59</sup> Both the ‘parent’ community and the ‘other’ community use the myths written and told about travelers, explorers, and conquerors to negotiate crises of representation and identity brought about by changing perceptions of space and time. For example, Malkin argues that the Greeks used myths about *nostoi* and Odysseus to define themselves in relation to colonization of the western Mediterranean just as much as the peoples of the western Mediterranean subverted these myths to define themselves. The Greeks living in Italy claimed descent from Odysseus, a Greek hero of the Trojan War, but the Romans claimed descent from Aeneas, a Trojan hero from the war. Both groups looked to Greek myths for their heroes; however, the Romans subverted the Greek version slightly by claiming descent from the Greeks’ enemies in the *Odyssey*.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, some Jews and Persians use Alexander, a Hellenistic hero-figure, to redefine their own history and identity, thus subtly subverting the familiar Hellenistic narrative while still operating within its framework.

Even so, while studying the role of explorers or traveller figures, it is important to avoid getting bogged down in questions over the “ownership” of heroes. For example, just because Odysseus was from the specific island of Ithaca does not preclude other communities from all over the Mediterranean from using him as a heroic explorer figure. In his discussion of the mythical genealogies of Mediterranean communities, Malkin says, “It was equally easy to attribute Greek heroic genealogy to Indians, Persians, Aiginetans, or Molossians, because what

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>60</sup> Malkin, *The Returns of Odysseus: Colonization and Ethnicity*, 29-30.

we call ‘Greek heroes’ were not Greek but simply heroes.”<sup>61</sup> Heroes often might have originated with one community; however, their role as heroes— especially travellers— allows other communities to claim them, use them, and reconstruct their narrative. Often, both groups of communities use these figures and their stories to negotiate with each other. Throughout history and all over the world, many different communities have looked to the heroic figure of Alexander the Great to construct their mythical genealogy. Like the contested city-founders, explorers and travelers can also be disputed, as the Odysseus/Aeneas example demonstrates. Groups of Jews, Orthodox Byzantines, and Persians use Alexander as a heroic explorer, either directly or indirectly, despite Alexander’s origins as a Macedonian hero.

#### Kings and Statesmen: Heroic Lawgivers and Ideal Rulers

A third category of heroic figures is comprised of ideal rulers and lawgivers. These heroic figures, like their city founding and exploring counterparts, can be found in myths and stories told by communities from all over the world. As pointed out by many scholars of the Hellenistic era, the rise of Alexander the Great marked a turning point in the practice and attitudes towards monarchy amongst Greeks in the Mediterranean.<sup>62</sup> Formerly, in cities such as Athens, monarchy had been seen as a despotic and ultimately barbarian form of government. However, after Phillip II of Macedonia conquered many of the Greek city-states, and after his son Alexander conquered much of the known world, the formerly privileged model of the *polis* was no longer effective for governing new large territories. Monarchy became the norm, though

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 17.

<sup>62</sup> Pointed out by Gruen and Bringmann in chapters 1 and 2 of section I in A. W. Bulloch, *Images and Ideologies: Self-Definition in the Hellenistic World*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), especially pages 3-4. See also F. W. Walbank, *The Hellenistic World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 74-78 for Hellenistic kingship.

scholar Erich Gruen points out that these new Hellenistic kings faced two problems—that they were Greek and that they were kings: “the first presented a challenge to their control of non-Hellenic peoples, the second complicated their relations with Hellenic traditions.”<sup>63</sup> Both of these contemporary ‘problems’ with Hellenistic kingship re-appear in various guises in the myths later told about Alexander. For example, how do certain communities of Jews reconcile their subservience to a Greek king, when they are supposed to be privileged by god over all other peoples? Or, if monarchy was so problematic to Greeks in the third century BCE, during Alexander’s reign, how do we see the final manifestations of the ideals of Hellenistic kingship in some Byzantine portrayals of Alexander? By the seventh century CE, when the Syriac sources about Alexander the Great are created, the relationship between Greeks and kings are much less ambiguous than in the third century BCE. The role kings were expected to play, and the manner in which they are portrayed reflect the changing perceptions of monarchy from community to community. However, in all communities, heroic leader and king figures were used to construct a mythical past of ideal rule, and the qualities of heroic kings were often projected onto current leaders in order to reinforce the power and legitimacy of the monarch.<sup>64</sup>

Before Alexander’s rise to prominence in the Greek Mediterranean imagination, heroic king figures were relegated mostly to the mythical past—to figures from Homeric epics, like Odysseus and Menelaos, and to legendary statesman, like Lycurgus and Solon. Justice and just rule were two of the most important concepts in ancient Greek political thought.<sup>65</sup> An ideal state was one in which all subjects were organized according to just laws, and kings legitimized their

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<sup>63</sup> Bulloch, *Images and Ideologies: Self-Definition in the Hellenistic World*, 4.

<sup>64</sup> The preservation and projection of power in the ancient Mediterranean is most thoroughly covered in Price’s book about the Roman Imperial Cult, see S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

<sup>65</sup> As philosophized by Plato in the *Republic* and *Statesman*, Aristotle in his *Politics*, and other Greek thinkers. For example, see Rosamond Kent Sprague, *Plato's Philosopher-King: A Study of the Theoretical Background* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1976), and Walbank, *The Hellenistic World*, 74-8.

power through conquest, hereditary succession, generosity, protection, administration of justice, and maintenance of stability, amongst many other actions. Ideal statesmen were ones who created infallibly just law codes, like the Spartan Lycurgus, the Athenian Solon, and Moses; or kings who mediated legal disputes with the most fairness, like King Solomon. Although figures like Moses and Solon were not actually kings, they were often portrayed similarly because of their connection with legal codes and leadership.<sup>66</sup> Kings and leaders were expected to be efficient and effective, as well as just, honorable, and merciful; the myths and stories told about heroic kings reflected these perceptions of leadership.<sup>67</sup>

But how did these abstract qualities become attached to a king's reputation? As theorized by Klaus Bringmann, one of the most important aspects in the interaction between kings and their subjects was the dynamic of the client-patron relationship. Drawing on Aristotle, Bringmann says,

Men owed to kings not only their survival, but good order in their lives. It was kingship which represented the principle of just rule, insofar as the aim of rule according to justice is to the benefit of the ruled. Therefore people were willing to accept the leadership of their benefactors.<sup>68</sup>

According to Bringmann, the give and take of a client-patron relationship defined the manner in which kingship was imagined.<sup>69</sup> Kings earned respect and the good will of their subjects by giving them gifts, whether in the form of tax exemptions or temple dedications. According to

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<sup>66</sup> For example, see the discussion in Erich S. Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition*, 133-134, on Moses as a Hellenistic king.

<sup>67</sup> While wrangling over what "justice" meant to Greeks and others is not something I have the space or desire to do, it is important to note that 'justice,' like 'democracy' and 'freedom' were not clearly or uniformly defined terms throughout the ancient Mediterranean. However, for the sake of my argument, what 'justice' or 'honor' meant to ancient Greeks or Jews or Persians is not important, it is the *expectation* that a king is supposed to be just and honorable that is of interest.

<sup>68</sup> Bulloch, *Images and Ideologies: Self-Definition in the Hellenistic World*, 7.

<sup>69</sup> As Polybius (5.11.6) said, "It would have been the part of a king to do good to all and thus rule and preside over a willing people, earning their love by his beneficence and humanity," in Polybius, et al, *The Histories* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2010); quote brought to my attention by Bringmann in Bulloch, *Images and Ideologies: Self-Definition in the Hellenistic World*, 7.

Classicist Anthony Bulloch, acts of beneficence performed by kings towards their subjects were wide-ranging, “Whatever he did to support, to protect, and to improve the Greek commonwealth of self-governing cities was appreciated as benefaction,” and this included, for example: the granting of land; the granting of a wide range of privileges; the construction of public and religious buildings; support in cash and in kind; protection from foreign or barbarian raids; the preservation or restoration of peace, democracy, and freedom; and royal generosity towards the god(s), to name but a few.<sup>70</sup>

Once a king or leader had thoroughly entered the realm of the heroic, he was often integrated into the mythical narrative of a community. For example, the biblical hero King Solomon had a reputation as a faultlessly just ruler that dated back to the creation of the Torah. However, many groups of Jews exploited Solomon’s already impressive reputation by reworking their history and creating many non-biblical stories about him. In the second century BCE, the Jewish writer Eupolemus writes about the relationship between King Solomon and an Egyptian king named Vaphres, who lived well after Solomon had died. While Solomon never actually exchanged letters with the Vaphres for obvious reasons, the story of the exchange “gave to Hellenistic Jews the sense of a proud heritage, of a nation whose impressive history both reflected divine favor and earned the approbation of the great powers.”<sup>71</sup> In the mythical communication between Solomon and Vaphres, the latter recognizes Solomon’s superiority and pays homage to the Israelite god. Thus, Jews like Eupolemus could feel empowered vis-a-vis their foreign and more powerful neighbors through the construction of a mythical past built around a heroic king. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a story with remarkable similarities to the one told by Eupolemus appears in the work of a Jew from the Roman Imperial period. In this myth,

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 9-14.

<sup>71</sup> This example comes from Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition*, 140-146.

which will be discussed below in more detail, Vaphres is replaced with Alexander, and Solomon is replaced with the Jewish high priest. This story is just one example of the use of heroic king and lawgiver figures in myths about Alexander.

Like the Jewish usage of Solomon's reputation as archetypal king, later communities exploited Alexander's reputation as ideal ruler in order to lend legitimacy and grandeur to their pasts. The portrayal of Alexander as ideal king and lawgiver is most prominent in the *Alexander Romances* and the Persian epic poems, especially the *Iskandarnamah*.<sup>72</sup> In these myths, Alexander's humility, intellectual prowess, justice, and righteousness are stressed through his encounters with tyrants and imperfect kings. The authors of these myths claim Alexander as one of their heroic kings and incorporate him into their historical narratives. Therefore, Alexander's ideal rule is associated with *their* past and is set up in direct opposition to the imperfect and corrupt rule of other kings and communities in the texts. The Persians look like the most responsible rulers on earth when the Persianized Alexander is compared to one of his enemies in the *Iskandarnamah*, such as the king of the Zangis, a barbaric and bloodthirsty tyrant.<sup>73</sup> Like the characterization of Alexander as archetypal leader in the *Iskandarnamah*, communities often later attach specific idealistic qualities to past rulers; whether these leaders are fictional or historical, the idealistic associations are often mythical in origin. These heroic leaders and ideal lawgivers are perfect characters to use in myths—myths about them can simplify and dramatize the story of a community's past in order to redefine its place in the world because they selectively narrate history.

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<sup>72</sup> For a discussion of Alexander as scholar and ideal king, see chapters 5 and 6 in Stoneman, *Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend*. Obviously not all of the Persian treatments of Alexander the Great are positive; indeed there are a number of narratives in which Alexander is villainized. For an overview, see *ibid.* 41-44.

<sup>73</sup> For Alexander's almost endless clash with the Zangis, see Minoo S. Southgate and Iraj Afshar, *Iskandarnamah: A Persian Medieval Alexander-Romance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 103-164.

As we have seen, the many mythological narratives about Alexander the Great must be read as part of a long tradition of heroic types. The manner in which communities portray Alexander draws on previous portrayals of heroic figures, and comparisons to characters like Herakles, Odysseus, and Solomon contextualize the strategies used by later communities to incorporate Alexander into their histories. For example, many cities claim Alexander as their founder, as was done with the figures of Herakles and Odysseus, and these communities used myths about all three heroes to place themselves in the context of an expanding or changing world. Similarly, travel and exploration often symbolized a metaphorical journey from the familiar to the unfamiliar, and this made heroic explorer figures like Odysseus, Herakles, and Alexander especially useful for dealing with change, including encountering strange peoples, new lands, or new situations. Finally, Alexander's portrayal as a heroic leader and lawgiver put him in the company of figures like King Solomon, Solon, and Lycurgus. These figures were used to construct mythical stories of ideal pasts and these stories were then projected onto contemporary situations in order to reinforce the legitimacy and power of the *status quo*, as seen in the example of the invented correspondence between Solomon and Vaphres, which gave legitimacy to the Jewish communities who created the myth. As an exploration of different heroic figures demonstrates, myths can be used not only to reinforce the current situation, but also to mediate change, as with heroic travellers and explorers. However, it is important to keep in mind that heroic figures are important only because they offer a medium through which a complex story about the past can be simplified, in order to create one of Bell's governing or subaltern myths. As I explore the different myths created about Alexander the Great, it is important to keep the methodological framework drawn from Bell and others in mind, as well as the role of heroes in mythological narrative.

## Chapter Two: The Impossible Prophecy: Jews and Alexander the Great

The Jewish texts on Alexander the Great span a long time period and range in nature from the historical to the mythical. Alexander appears in the writings of the Roman-Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, in a version of the *Alexander Romance* attributed to Pseudo-Callisthenes probably written by Jews from the great Hellenistic city of Alexandria, in the Talmud, and in medieval Rabbinic re-workings of the *Alexander Romances*, to name but a few examples.<sup>74</sup> In this section, I will examine Josephus's account of Alexander's interaction with the Jews, written in the first century CE, and the  $\gamma$ -recension of the *Alexander Romance*, which was most likely circulating around the Jewish community of Alexandria as early as the third century CE.<sup>75</sup> From the analysis of these texts, it is evident that some Jewish communities of the Roman Imperial period used the figure of Alexander the Great, and reinterpreted his story, in order to define themselves in a period of change and crisis.<sup>76</sup>

The Jews who created these stories about Alexander the Great lived in a world dominated by outsiders. After the Babylonian exile (sixth century BCE), and with the exception of a brief

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<sup>74</sup> See Stoneman, *Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend* Appendix I for more on the texts.

<sup>75</sup> The  $\gamma$ -recension refers to one version of the *Alexander Romance*, attributed to the writer Callisthenes (hence the modern identification of the author as "Pseudo-Callisthenes"), which appears in several different forms. The different recensions come from different places and include different stories, though they follow (more or less) the same basic narrative. For more on the different recensions, see Stoneman's introduction in Pseudo-Callisthenes, *The Greek Alexander Romance*, 29. The final version of the  $\gamma$ -recension was probably not completed until the eight or ninth century CE; however, Stoneman convincingly argues that many of the elements found in the recension were circulating in Alexandria as early as the third century CE. Dating the  $\gamma$ -recension is a complex undertaking, and although the process of compiling the final version of the  $\gamma$ -recension took several centuries, I believe it is safe to assign a context of Alexandria in the third to fourth centuries for most of the material in the  $\gamma$ -recension, though certainly not all material. For more on the chronology of the  $\gamma$ -recension, see *ibid.* 28-30.

<sup>76</sup> Although the groups of Jews who created the texts I examine have certain identities and ideologies, I want to point out that "Jewish identity" and "Judaism" during the Roman Imperial period (and beyond) are ambiguous terms. Not all Jews felt the same way about foreign rule, nor did they agree over who was "Jewish" or what "Judaism" meant, nor is it clear that such a word or concept even existed at the time. The "Jews" I study are just one group, with one voice, in a much larger community of different types of Jews, all of whom have their own identity and opinion about Jewishness. For more, see Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition*; see also Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

period of semi-autonomy during the Hasmonean Dynasty (166-63 BCE) in the late Hellenistic period, Judea was occupied by a string of foreign powers, and Jews were ruled by foreign leaders. After Alexander the Great's conquests, Jews found themselves under the thumb of a succession of imperial powers, and they were occasionally persecuted for their religious beliefs. They were ruled by the Hellenistic kingdoms of the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Seleucids of Syria. After a successful revolt against the Seleucids, the Hasmonean dynasty reigned, with sponsorship from Rome, for around 100 years. Following a dispute over succession, Rome officially took control of Judea and Palestine.

From 66-70 CE the Jews of Palestine revolted against Rome, and the war ended catastrophically. The Second Temple in Jerusalem, which was the center of Jewish religious belief and identity, was destroyed by the Roman general (and later emperor) Titus. The Romans killed thousands of Jews and the Jewish people of Palestine were emotionally and physically devastated by the war. Only two generations later, from 132-136 CE, groups of Jews fought Rome again in the Bar Kokhba Revolt, only to be completely crushed; many Jews were dispersed throughout the Mediterranean and Central Asia in exile. How did Jews react to political and military defeat, and how did they reconcile a religious ideology of being god's "chosen" to the reality of persecution and subjugation? This question is not only relevant following the Jewish revolts against Rome, but for many groups of Jews (though not for all Jews) throughout Jewish history more generally— from the Babylonian exile, through the conquests of Alexander the Great, and to the rule of the Ptolemies and Seleucids as well. The Alexander the Great narratives as told by Jews of the Roman Imperial period create an idealized

version of “their place in a world governed by Greek monarchs.”<sup>77</sup> Starting with Alexander, who is associated with the birth of the Hellenistic world, continuing on through the Hellenistic successor states, and up through their subordination to Rome, Jews tried to reconcile their political and social suppression with their belief of being a “chosen people” and of the supreme power of their god.

The texts created by some Jewish communities during the Roman Imperial period offer insight into their process of self-definition, which takes place in response to the changes of the Hellenistic and Roman Imperial periods. Josephus relates a visit of Alexander to Jerusalem in his *Jewish Antiquities*, which dates from the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian and was most likely written around 93-94 CE.<sup>78</sup> The historicity of this account is questionable; most scholars agree that Alexander never visited Jerusalem.<sup>79</sup> However, in Josephus’s story, Alexander visits Jerusalem, converts to Judaism,<sup>80</sup> and grants privileges to the Jews, including periodic exemptions from taxation. Upon Alexander’s visit to Jerusalem, Josephus has Alexander prostrate himself before the Jewish high priest and Alexander is allowed to sacrifice in temple. The Jews show him the book of Daniel, which is interpreted as an oracle referring to Alexander’s destruction of the Persians. It is an impossible prophecy, because the book of Daniel was not written until after 165 BCE, over 150 years after Alexander’s death.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition*, 194; see also Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties*.

<sup>78</sup> J. C. Edmondson, "Introduction: Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome," in *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome*, ed. J. C. Edmondson, Steve Mason, and J. B. Rives (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>79</sup> The passage appears in Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, XI.304- XI.347. For a summary of the debate over the historicity of this passage, see Appendix C at the end of the volume.

<sup>80</sup> This conversion would probably read differently to Jews than to non-Jews. Hellenistic and Roman pagans often incorporated many different gods into their pantheon, so the conversion would seem to be another example of Alexander adopting a new god, while not excluding other gods. For Jews, a conversion might read as an exclusive worship of only the Jewish god.

<sup>81</sup> For more on the anachronistic nature of the book of Daniel in Josephus’s version of Alexander’s visit to Jerusalem see *ibid.* 477, note d.

What purpose did Josephus's version of Alexander's interactions with the Jews serve?

The incident is placed within a larger discussion in *Jewish Antiquities* about relations between the Jews and their neighbors and archrivals the Samaritans. The two groups frequently fought each other, and in the Hellenistic and Roman Imperial periods Jews often defined themselves, to some extent, in relation to the Samaritans, whose practices resembled those of their Jewish neighbors but who did not worship at the temple in Jerusalem and who did not honor the high priest there.<sup>82</sup> According to Josephus, the Samaritans get permission from Alexander to build a separate temple on Mount Gerizim by distancing themselves from the Jews of Palestine. However once Jews get favorable taxation privileges from Alexander, the Samaritans try to identify themselves with Jews while attempting to maintain their political and religious autonomy from them.<sup>83</sup> It seems, therefore, that one purpose of Alexander's appearance in Jerusalem in Josephus's work is to draw clear distinctions between Jews and Samaritans. Josephus's treatment of the relationship between the Macedonian conqueror and the Jews sets up a power dynamic in his work, which not only puts Jews above the conquering Macedonians, but above their rivals the Samaritans as well. For example, the Samaritans come to Alexander as supplicants, and they give over to Alexander their holdings in the hope that he will ally with them and grant them the right to build a temple.<sup>84</sup> On the other hand, when Alexander comes to Jerusalem, the roles are reversed. Alexander prostrates himself before the high priest and honors

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<sup>82</sup> For more on Jews and Samaritans see Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* and Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition*. Jewish imperialism in the late Hellenistic period is a feature of the Hasmonean Dynasty, which ruled in the late second century BCE, and Jewish-Samaritan relations are discussed briefly in 1 Maccabees, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: New Revised Standard Version*, translated by Michael David Coogan et al., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), when the Jews conquer the Samaritans, and in the New Testament Gospels, where the moral of story of the "good Samaritan" is to love all humans regardless of community identity.

<sup>83</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, XI.322-326, XI.340-345.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. XI.321.

the god of the Jews.<sup>85</sup> Comparing the portrayal of Alexander's relationship with the Samaritans to his interactions with the Jews highlights the special treatment Jews received from Alexander as opposed to Alexander's treatment of their often-hated neighbors. However, the construction of Jewish primacy over the Samaritans from Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* is not the only manner in which Jews play with the Alexander narrative.

Although Josephus was writing after the destruction of the Second Temple, the temple still remained an important unifying symbol for many Jews. More importantly, after the cataclysmic destruction of the temple and defeat of the First Jewish Revolt, Jewish communities faced a real prospect of losing their identity and even their existence as a people. They had no homeland to speak of and temple on which to focus their beliefs and rituals. Josephus's portrayal of the Samaritans as imposters to the Jewish faith serves as an attempt to maintain unity in the face of chaos and understand the place of Jews in a world without a temple. Josephus was proud to say that Jews lived in all parts of the world; he viewed the diasporic nature of Judaism as a gift from god.<sup>86</sup> However, many Jews felt they needed a new approach to identifying themselves without a temple. This new approach can be seen in the effort of Jews to find their place in a world governed by outsiders-- Hellenistic kings and Roman emperors. The story about the Jews' encounter with Alexander in Josephus's *Antiquities* paints Jews in a positive light, especially in relation to one of the most well-known founder heroes of the Hellenistic world. This story also allows Josephus to define Jews against a dangerous proximate "other"— the Samaritans. Josephus uses Alexander the Great as part of an effort to construct his vision of Jewish identity, which allowed Jews to retain their sense of being a "privileged people" after the

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid. XI.331-332.

<sup>86</sup> Erich S. Gruen, "Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome (Review)," *American Journal of Philology* 127, no. 4 (2006), 618.

catastrophic destruction of much of Judaism's core unifying tenets. Interestingly, perhaps Josephus could be responding more directly to the destruction of the Second Temple and the rise of the Flavian Dynasty. It is worth noting that the first two Flavian emperors, Vespasian and Titus, were the most recent foreign kings to visit Jerusalem at the time Josephus wrote *Jewish Antiquities*, and that their visits coincided with the revolt and subsequent destruction of the city.<sup>87</sup> Vespasian attempted to frame himself as the “next Alexander” and, therefore, Josephus's portrayal of Alexander in *Jewish Antiquities* might be tied to Vespasian's or Titus's recent actions in Jerusalem.

Many of the features of Alexander's visit to Jerusalem found in *Jewish Antiquities* are mirrored in the  $\gamma$ -recension of the *Alexander Romances*. As in the story told by Josephus, the Jews are impressed by Alexander's military prowess and are frightened at his approach. However, instead of destroying Jerusalem, Alexander honors the Jews by adopting their god and dedicating their gifts to him to the god of the Jews.<sup>88</sup> The importance of this story is similar to that of Josephus's mythical insertion: the positive treatment the Jews get from Alexander in this mythical narrative is historicized and enters the communal governing myth, a useful tool for self-definition and for self-representation. The history of relations between Jews and foreign rulers is complex and not always flattering for Jews. By creating a myth, the Jewish authors of these myths illustrate Bell's understanding of mythical narratives by simplifying and compressing their complicated history into an easy to understand and easy to transmit story that portrays their

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<sup>87</sup> Though Vespasian and Titus were not yet emperors at the time of their visits. Suetonius, *De Vita Caesarum—Divus Vespasianus c. 110 CE*, in J. C. Rolfe, ed., *Suetonius*, 2 Volumes, The Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann, and New York: The MacMillan Co., 1914), II.281-321, accessed April 24, 2011, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/suetonius-vespasian.html> and Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War*, translated by H. St J. Thackeray (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>88</sup> The brief story of Alexander's visit to Jerusalem in the  $\gamma$ -recension can be found in Pseudo-Callisthenes, *The Greek Alexander Romance*, 169-170. While there is much more content connecting Jews to Alexander in this recension, I will focus on this story as an example of the relationship between Jews and the Alexander myths in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. For the ambiguity of Alexander's “adoption” or “conversion” see page 33, n. 80.

community in a positive light.<sup>89</sup> Additionally, this story could be used as a template for how other Jews could interact with foreign kings, specifically foreign imperial powers, in the future. The portrayal of the relationship between the Jews and Alexander, traditionally seen as the first Hellenistic king, shows how groups of Jews rewrote their history into a simplified and easily digestible narrative that glorified and resonated emotionally with their community.

In the stories told both by Josephus and by the author(s) of the  $\gamma$ -recension of the *Alexander Romance*, several important conclusions can be drawn about how these communities reconciled the political reality of subjugation with their religious ideology of privilege. First, the characterization of both Alexander and the Jews, especially the Jewish high priest, needs to be considered. Alexander descends on Jerusalem with the intent to crush the inhabitants.<sup>90</sup> He is angry with them for either aiding the rebels at Tyre or refusing to accept his rule.<sup>91</sup> The Jews are thrown into panic and pray for help. Instead of getting martial power from god, or some miraculous victory over Alexander's Hellenistic juggernaut, god's aid comes in the form of Alexander's mercy. Alexander is impressed by the appearance of the Jewish high priest, who is portrayed as "in an agony of fear,"<sup>92</sup> but Alexander remembers a dream that contained a prophecy of his victories, in which the prophecy came from the "God of whom [the Jewish high priest] has the honor to be the high priest."<sup>93</sup> There are multiple layers of power implied by this story. First, although Alexander prostrates himself before the Jewish high priest, martial power is still with Alexander, who spares Jerusalem and the Jews only through his divinely inspired

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<sup>89</sup> Bell, "Mythscapes: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity," 63-81, 67.

<sup>90</sup> Just as Titus and Vespasian descend on Jerusalem in anger during the First Jewish Revolt. Maybe Josephus is trying to tell Titus and Vespasian how they *should* have reacted upon arriving in Jerusalem—by sparing the city. However, this is just speculation; it seems necessary to point out the possibility of a connection even if it just an echo.

<sup>91</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, XI.317-320, and Pseudo-Callisthenes, *The Greek Alexander Romance*, 168-169, respectively.

<sup>92</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, XI.326.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* XI.333-4.

mercy. However, complicating this power dynamic is the implication that Alexander's mercy comes from the Jewish god, who intervenes on behalf of his people. The message conveyed to Jewish readers is twofold— on the surface, it implies that Jews should embrace the rule of foreign kings. Here, there are parallels with other stories in Jewish historiography. For example, Jewish traditions dealing with the Babylonian exile and the sack of Jerusalem by Titus both portray a divinely willed subjugation of the Jews by foreigners as retribution for Jewish misdeeds.<sup>94</sup> It is god's will that the Jews be in the power of others. The deeper meaning to this message, however, is that the Jews are still the "chosen people," they are just suffering temporarily and this suffering is justified because it is god's will that the Jews be subjugated. Eventually, the Jews will have paid enough for their sins and god will favor them over foreigners in the political realm once again.<sup>95</sup>

These Hellenistic and Roman Jewish interpretations of Alexander's relationship to their ancestors do not only provide precedence for foreign rule. As pointed out by many scholars, colonial subjugation of one group to another is not simply a dichotomous relationship of resistance and acceptance.<sup>96</sup> The colonized often subtly subvert the dominant culture of the colonizer for their own use, through what post-colonial scholar Mary Louise Pratt calls transculturation: "a process whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from the materials transmitted by the dominant...culture."<sup>97</sup> As evident in the use of the city founder figures Odysseus and Aeneas by Greeks and Romans in Italy, two groups often take

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<sup>94</sup> For Titus, see Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War* and for the Babylonian exile see the biblical book of Isaiah.

<sup>95</sup> Of course, the wily Josephus does not take the implications of his depiction this far-- he only leaves open the idea that the possibility for a powerful Jewish political force could exist in the future.

<sup>96</sup> See especially John M. G. Barclay, "The Empire Writes Back: Josephan Rhetoric in Flavian Rome," in *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome*, 315-332; this piece addresses Josephus's work from a post-colonial perspective.

<sup>97</sup> Pratt, *Arts of the Contact Zone*, 2.

different narrative from the same mythical framework.<sup>98</sup> This is the case with the role of oracles in myths about Alexander, whose fame comes partially from his reputation as founder of Alexandria. As discussed above, Alexandria was one of the most powerful and successful cities of the world of antiquity, and according to widespread tradition, it was founded by Alexander the Great partly as a result of oracles he received during the early stages of his conquests.<sup>99</sup> Depending on the tradition, the oracles that “spurred Alexander’s campaigns and bolstered his spirits” came from the Egyptian god Ammon, the Greco-Roman god Apollo, or the Greco-Egyptian god Serapis, and they also prophesized Alexander’s conquest of Asia and the world.<sup>100</sup> Some Jewish authors subverted these familiar and widely disseminated stories of prophecy to serve their own ends of communal self-definition and glorification.

The oracles given by the Jews to Alexander, found in the book of Daniel and the dream in *Jewish Antiquities*, are clear examples of the “in between-ness” of assimilation and antagonism discussed by post-colonial scholars. There is a long Hellenistic tradition of oracular interactions between humans and gods, and the direct involvement of gods in the daily lives of humans which Alexander himself seems to exploit in many of the early histories written about him. Alexander supposedly received oracles at Delphi from Apollo, and at Siwah (in the Egyptian desert) from Ammon.<sup>101</sup> This tradition gets twisted slightly by Jewish authors—through transculturation, the

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<sup>98</sup> Discussed above on page 19.

<sup>99</sup> See Appendix V in Arrian and P. A. Brunt, *Anabasis of Alexander* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976) for a discussion of the ancient historical traditions about Alexander’s founding of the city of Alexandria. For more on Alexandria, see the Introduction to Christopher Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity: Topography and Social Conflict* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), and Fraser, *Cities of Alexander the Great*.

<sup>100</sup> The god is Ammon in Arrian, *Anabasis of Alexander*; Apollo in Plutarch, *Selected Lives: From the Parallel Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, translated by John Dryden (Franklin Center, PA: Franklin Library, 1982); and Serapis in Pseudo-Callisthenes, *The Greek Alexander Romance*; to name just a few examples. See Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition*, 197 and n. 23. According to Suetonius, Vespasian also received an oracle from Serapis that predicted his ascension to the throne. See Suetonius, *De Vita Caesarum—Divus Vespasianus*, VII.

<sup>101</sup> See Plutarch, *Selected Lives: From the Parallel Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*; Arrian, *Anabasis of Alexander*; and Quintus Curtius Rufus, *The History of Alexander* translated by John Yardley and Waldemar Heckel

authors adopt elements of the dominant Hellenistic and Roman culture; however, the adopted elements read differently to Jews and Romans. The Jewish authors draw on the Hellenistic tradition of oracular prophecy in order to subvert the dominant Hellenistic governing myth about Alexander. In Josephus's *Antiquities*, the oracles that predict Alexander's conquests and subjugation of Asia come from the Jewish god, about which Erich Gruen wrote: "the substitution of Yahweh for Apollo or Ammon as the genuine guarantor of success and the introduction of Daniel as prophet of truth would supply a special twist...one could hardly wish for a better example of Jewish expropriation and transformation of a Hellenistic theme."<sup>102</sup> Switching Alexander's source of power from a Hellenistic god to the Jewish god certainly changes the relationship between Jews and their foreign overlords, especially because of the importance of Alexander as a prototype for Greco-Roman kingship and the connection between the oracles Alexander receives and his conquest of the world and founding of Alexandria. While Alexander might be the one with political power over the Jews in Jerusalem, he can only achieve his many victories through the will of the god of the Jews. In this manner, the Jewish authors create what Bell would call a "subaltern myth" in order to challenge the "absolute meaning" of the governing myth.<sup>103</sup> The use of hero figures allows myths—both subaltern and governing—to serve specific agendas and to become easily digestible. However when two groups claim the same hero, the resultant myths can be at odds with one another. In this manner, the Jewish authors' use of Alexander not only attempts to reconcile a privileged ideology with foreign rule, it also serves to contest the dominant Greco-Roman use of Alexander by creating a subaltern myth that

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(Harmondsworth, UK; New York: Penguin Books, 1984); as well as Pseudo-Callisthenes, *The Greek Alexander Romance* for examples. For more about paganism and Roman daily life and oracles in general, see Ramsay MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

<sup>102</sup> My use of the oracles from Josephus to discuss subversion of Hellenistic themes by Jews is heavily indebted to Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition* 197 and Barclay, "The Empire Writes Back: Josephan Rhetoric in Flavian Rome," 315-332.

<sup>103</sup> Bell, "Mythscape: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity," 74.

strengthens and glorifies the authors' conceptions of Jewish identity while appropriating elements of Greek and Roman culture. Whether or not Josephus is boldly and directly contrasting Alexander and Vespasian and their respective (mis)treatment of Jerusalem is unclear, but his use of Alexander, with whom Vespasian claims a connection, suggests that might be the case.

Another manner in which Jews use Alexander to define their position in the Hellenistic world is by tracing their privileges back through history to Alexander the Great. This practice is evident in Josephus's *Antiquities* and it is implied in the  $\gamma$ -recension of the *Alexander Romances*. Josephus has Alexander grant Jews certain exemptions from taxation, and in the  $\gamma$ -recension, Alexander refuses to take tribute from the Jews and instead donates it to the service of the Jewish god. In the other writings of Josephus, Alexander grants rights and privileges to Jews from around the diaspora, especially to Alexandrian Jews.<sup>104</sup> These included tax exemptions and special legal exemptions, among other privileges. The myths created about privileges that are found in both Josephus and the *Alexander Romance* utilize Alexander's role as heroic leader and law giver, as well as heroic city founder. The complex historical narrative of the origin of Jewish privileges in Alexandria is simplified into a myth which looks to the oldest and most venerable source—the founder and lawgiver Alexander himself. As Bell points out, the temporal dimension of myths skew “the perception of past and future in a linear historical timeline, as if the claims (often false) of age somehow imbued the nation with moral and political authenticity.”<sup>105</sup> Thus, these Jews use Alexander to create a myth that collapses time, silencing centuries of political squabbling and recent catastrophe at the hands of Vespasian and Titus, in

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<sup>104</sup> See Flavius Josephus and H. St J. Thackeray, *Against Apion* (Cambridge MA; London: Harvard University Press; W. Heinemann, 1934), and Josephus, *The Jewish War*.

<sup>105</sup> Bell, “Mythsapes: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity,” 75-6.

order to create the impression that Jewish privilege, in the eastern Mediterranean (and especially in Alexandria) is as old as Alexander himself. The story appears to be rooted in the distant past, however closer examination reveals that the myth is a recent creation: the myth that Alexander granted the Jewish community, in Alexandria and elsewhere, special privileges is a textbook example of one of Hobsbawm and Ranger's invented traditions, and its purpose is to simplify a complex history into an easily transmittable and understandable narrative of privilege in the face of recent events that say otherwise.

A final example of the utilization of Alexander as a hero figure also comes from Josephus. He relates in *Antiquities* that Alexander recruits Jewish soldiers, who serve him well, and there is evidence apart from Josephus that Jews served with Alexander. To become fully functioning members of Hellenistic society, Jews would have to serve in the army because military service was an important marker of social acceptance and integration in the Hellenistic and Roman Imperial periods.<sup>106</sup> As Erich Gruen states, “[there is] a pattern discernable in...reports of the Macedonian's benefactions to Jews, a proper return for their allegiance and their courage, thereby associating the nation with the achievements of the great conqueror.”<sup>107</sup> The story of Jews serving in Alexander's army, mythical or not, connects the Jewish community directly to Alexander's famous military conquests. Groups of Jews build their mythical history around Alexander's role as heroic conqueror, and this heroic narrative is incorporated into the Jews' identity in order to glorify the community and suppress other military defeats at the hands of foreign invaders.

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<sup>106</sup> Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition*, 199.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.* 201.

Jewish communities use myths about Alexander the Great to give themselves important privileges, to show that they have been fully integrated members of society since the fourth century BCE, and to define their continuing distinctiveness in a Hellenistic world, even though they are ruled by foreigners and no longer have a homeland or temple upon which to build an identity. The mythical portrayals of Alexander demonstrate important facets of the identity of Jewish groups in the Hellenistic in the Roman Imperial periods, as seen in Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* and in the  $\gamma$ -recension of the *Alexander Romances*. These Jews use Alexander in particular because of his heroic reputation: his importance in tradition as the first Hellenistic king, as creator of the Hellenistic world, as founder of the great city of Alexandria, and as conqueror of the world. These Jewish reinterpretations of his story serve to create a subaltern myth that shapes the authors' conceptions of Jewish identity in the face of disorienting change: for large groups of Jews, a loss of many traditional Jewish tenets of communal identity.

### Chapter Three: The Arbiter of the Apocalypse: Byzantines and Alexander the Great

Communities of Jews were not the only ones to rewrite the life story of Alexander the Great in order to respond to unfamiliar developments and disastrous reversals of fortune. Communities of Orthodox Byzantine Christians responded to the rise of a new world order by reworking their identity, and part of their program included incorporating myths about Alexander the Great into their historical narrative.<sup>108</sup> The Syriac versions of the Alexander the Great narrative come out of the tradition of the *Alexander Romances* of Pseudo-Callisthenes and contain many similar stories to the *Romances*. They were most likely written in the seventh century CE, and were created somewhere in the geographic region which lay between the Persian and Byzantine Empires, probably in modern Syria or Armenia.<sup>109</sup> That the texts contain religious elements is evident from the highly apocalyptic nature of the narrative. The two texts I will examine are almost exclusively concerned with an apocalyptic prophecy and struggle against the “unclean nations.” In this section, I will look at a Syriac source attributed to the ecclesiastical author Jacob of Serugh and a slightly earlier *Christian Legend Concerning Alexander*.<sup>110</sup> Exploration of the texts demonstrates that these authors used stories about Alexander to redefine their communal governing myth in the face of the disintegration of their empire. By working victorious and divinely sanctioned narratives about Alexander into their communal governing myth, the authors are able to construct a historical narrative that elides their

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<sup>108</sup> When I use the term “Byzantine,” I refer to the Byzantine state and its governing ideology. There were certainly other groups with their own identities within the extremely diverse and heterodox Byzantine state, especially in the region where these texts were created, however I argue that these myths come from a very specific community within the Byzantine Empire: Reinink convincingly argues that these texts were propaganda created at the request of the central Byzantine government to convince monophysite Syrians and Armenians to remain loyal to the Byzantine state after their loyalty was called into question during the recent wars with Persia in G. J. Reinink, Bernard H. Stolte, and Rijksuniversiteit te Groningen, *The Reign of Heraclius (610-641): Crisis and Confrontation* (Leuven, Belgium; Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2002), 81-94.

<sup>109</sup> Richard Stoneman, *Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend*, 232-233.

<sup>110</sup> All these texts are accessible in one volume; see Pseudo-Callisthenes and E. A. Wallis Budge, *The History of Alexander the Great, being the Syriac Version of the Pseudo-Callisthenes*, (Cambridge: The University Press, 1889).

recent political and military collapses. These Orthodox Byzantine Christian myths about Alexander collapse a complex past of military struggle, triumph, and defeat into a simple narrative that portrays the Byzantine past and the Byzantine state as divinely privileged.

The Syriac texts about Alexander the Great's life were created at a time of crisis in the Byzantine Empire. They were the products of the seventh century, which saw Byzantium attacked by both old and new enemies. The Byzantines fought a catastrophic war against Persia from 603-630 CE, staved off repeated invasions of "Huns" from central Asia,<sup>111</sup> and witnessed the rise of the challenge of Islam. The many wars fought by the Byzantines during the time these texts were created left the empire poor, physically and emotionally devastated, and on the verge of collapse. Only a daring military operation by the Byzantine emperor Heraclius saved the Byzantines from defeat at the hands of the Persians during the beginning of the seventh century. Despite Heraclius's victories, the Byzantines lost a string of battles to Persians and central Asian nomads, and they lost significant amounts of territory to the invading Arabs as well.<sup>112</sup> The Byzantines viewed themselves as defenders of the true faith: Orthodox Christianity, and like the Jewish communities encountered earlier, saw themselves as a "unique theological entity, part of god's design for the salvation of mankind."<sup>113</sup> How did the Byzantines respond to the material and ideological crises of repeated defeat at the hands of (groups they would consider) infidels? How do the Syriac myths about Alexander reflect a conflict between the reality of humiliating defeat and the ideology of divinely inspired strength, and how do the Byzantine authors reconcile

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<sup>111</sup> In late antiquity, the term "Hun" was used to refer to central Asian nomadic people. E. A. Wallis Budge in "A Christian Legend Concerning Alexander," in *The History of Alexander the Great, being the Syriac Version of the Pseudo-Callisthenes*, ed. E. A. Wallis Budge (Cambridge: The University Press, 1889), 144, n.1.

<sup>112</sup> For a more detailed history of the Byzantine Empire during the reign of Heraclius and its interactions with invading Persians and Muslims, see Walter Emil Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992). For the English translation of the *Christian Legend*, see Pseudo-Callisthenes, *A Christian Legend Concerning Alexander*.

<sup>113</sup> Robert Browning, *The Byzantine Empire* (New York: Scribner, 1980), 14.

this conflict? The Byzantines invent new traditions in order to define themselves, because their old traditions were challenged by a sudden reversal of fortunes. As Hobsbawm and Ranger theorized, new traditions are invented “more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which ‘old’ traditions had been designed.”<sup>114</sup> The disintegration of empire faced by the Byzantines in the seventh century definitely qualified as a rapid transformation of society. Byzantine imperial ideology was challenged by repeated defeat and thus the old traditions and governing myths of the empire needed to be reconstructed, or at least reinforced, to suit new circumstances. The Alexander narratives created by these Orthodox Byzantine Christian authors attempt to redefine a governing Byzantine state identity to outsiders within the empire, like heterodox monophysite Christians from Syria and Armenia, and to groups already loyal to the Byzantine state.

The *Christian Legend Concerning Alexander* was most likely written sometime shortly after 628.<sup>115</sup> It spends very little time with the events of Alexander’s life before he arrives in the border-lands near the “unclean nations;” there is much taken from the *Alexander Romance* tradition, though there are a few new stories. Many of the “historical” events of Alexander’s life are not present, or are severely distorted, even when compared to the other *Alexander Romances*. For example, the Persian king Alexander fights is not Darius, and the war against the Persians does not take place in Asia Minor or Persia, as it does in Arrian and others’ accounts.<sup>116</sup> Once Alexander reaches the border-lands, he learns that the area is controlled by a Persian king, and he also hears about the horrors of the unclean nations: Gog and Magog, which are here also called

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<sup>114</sup> Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, 5.

<sup>115</sup> Kevin van Bladel, "The Alexander Legend in the Qur'an 18:83-102," in *The Quran in its Historical Context*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (London; New York: Routledge, 2008), 184; and G. J. Reinink, Bernard H. Stolte, and Rijksuniversiteit te Groningen, *The Reign of Heraclius (610-641): Crisis and Confrontation*, 81-94.

<sup>116</sup> For the traditional historical account of Alexander’s life and conquests see Arrian, *Anabasis of Alexander* or the less well-regarded Curtius Rufus, *The History of Alexander* and Plutarch, *Selected Lives: From the Parallel Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*.

the Huns; he hears about those beyond Gog and Magog, who are “Dog-men,” and “Menine,” both of whom are described as inhuman and cruel.<sup>117</sup> Beyond these inhuman, unclean nations is the “Paradise of God.” Alexander erects a giant gate in the mountain pass to prevent the unclean nations from entering the “civilized” lands he has conquered, and upon the gate he inscribes a prophecy.<sup>118</sup> The main points of the prophecy are as follows: when the Huns conquer all the lands of the Romans and Persians, then God will open the gates built by Alexander, and innumerable kingdoms of the unclean nations will pour out into the civilized world, and everyone will fight each other. In the end, Rome will rule all the lands and their inhabitants.<sup>119</sup>

As pointed out by Kevin van Bladel,

The *Alexander Legend* combines two traditions (1) Alexander’s building of a wall in the Caucasus to hold out the Huns and (2) the identification of Huns, a generic term for all Central Asian peoples, with Gog and Magog, thereby associating Alexander with the end of time and giving him the occasion to make eschatological prophecies.<sup>120</sup>

The conflation of these two traditions allows the authors of the Orthodox Byzantine texts to create engaging and effective myths about Alexander and these fictional narratives illuminate Alexander’s connection to their community’s role in history.

There are two important connections to make before analyzing the Syriac texts any further. The first connection concerns Gog and Magog, who are apocalyptic figures originally from the Hebrew Bible, who also feature in the New Testament, and who entered popular culture

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<sup>117</sup> “When they go forth to war, they fetch a pregnant woman, and pile up a fire, and bind her in front of the fire, and cook her child within her, and her belly bursts and the child comes forth roasted,” Pseudo-Callisthenes, *A Christian Legend Concerning Alexander*, 151. The meaning of “Menine” is unclear from Budge’s translation.

<sup>118</sup> The gate of Alexander is a famous story in the tradition of the *Alexander Romances* and many scholars believe there was a real gate erected somewhere in the Caucasus mountains which was connected to Alexander, though probably not built by Alexander. For more on the historicity of the gate, see Stoneman, *Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend*, 176.

<sup>119</sup> The translation of the prophecy written on the gate can be found in Pseudo-Callisthenes, *A Christian Legend Concerning Alexander*, 154-156.

<sup>120</sup> van Bladel, “The Alexander Legend in the Qur’an 18:83-102,” 187.

as symbols of the forces of evil during the apocalypse largely through the *Alexander Romances* and other associated texts.<sup>121</sup> That Gog and Magog get conflated with the Huns highlights the religious and eschatological nature of the conflict between the Byzantines and their enemies, as viewed by the Byzantines.<sup>122</sup> The apocalypticism of the conflicts described in the Byzantine texts about Alexander is a perfect example of Bell's argument that myths flatten history into a simplified perception of past and future in order to create a narrative that glorifies the community.<sup>123</sup> Apocalyptic constructions of time simplify complex chronologies into a single, linear narrative. They have one clear beginning, all later events can be placed along the mythical timeline (or conveniently left out of history), and they all lead to some final, predetermined event that signifies the end of time and history.

The second connection that needs to be addressed before further analysis of the texts concerns the links between the Greeks of Alexander's time, the Romans of the Roman Imperial period, and the Byzantines who created these texts. Byzantine imperial ideology considered the Byzantine Empire a continuation of the Roman Empire, and in the Greek-speaking eastern Mediterranean, it was common to equate the Byzantines with the Romans.<sup>124</sup> The Byzantines referred to themselves as "*Romanoi*," as evident in the prophecy given in these two texts, and in other texts from throughout the Byzantine Empire.<sup>125</sup> While Romans went to great lengths to

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<sup>121</sup> For more on Gog and Magog, see Stoneman, *Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend*, 176. They are first mentioned in *Genesis* 10.2 and *Ezekiel* 38.1-3, then in *Revelation* 20.7-8.

<sup>122</sup> For the Byzantine interpretation of contemporary, seventh century events in an apocalyptic worldview, see G. J. Reinink, Bernard H. Stolte, and Rijksuniversiteit te Groningen, *The Reign of Heraclius (610-641): Crisis and Confrontation*, 81-83.

<sup>123</sup> Bell, *Mythscapes: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity*, 63-81, 75.

<sup>124</sup> Not only did the Byzantines call themselves Romans, their enemies called them Romans too. Invading Persians, Arabs, and Turks all referred to the Byzantines as Romans. Constantine the Great, widely considered to be the founder of the Byzantine Empire, called his capitol city of Constantinople "New Rome."

<sup>125</sup> An example of the Byzantine claim to being a continuation of the Roman Empire in their imperial ideology can be seen in Luidprand of Cremona's chronicle of his multiple visits to the Byzantine Empire during the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE. In these chronicles, a conflict over ownership of the Roman imperial heritage is clearly visible between Liudprand (and his sponsor, Otto I the Holy Roman Emperor) and the Byzantine Court: Liudprand, F. A. Wright,

distinguish themselves from the Greeks, who they viewed as inferior, Roman individuals still used Alexander as a model hero and frequently used him to glorify themselves allegorically.<sup>126</sup> However, the Byzantines saw no contradiction in identifying themselves with both Romans and ancient Greeks. There is a significant amount of scholarly disagreement over where to draw the line between the “Byzantine” and “Roman” Empires, though they operate only as convenient categories for later historians, not for the “Byzantines” or “Romans” themselves. For the sake of constructing a clear chronology, I follow Robert Browning in his idea that the defining characterization which separates Byzantine and Roman society is the importance of Christianity in the former, and therefore use his loose date of 500 CE as the time when the transition from “Rome” to “Byzantine” took place, though in the eyes of contemporaries, the Byzantines were Romans.<sup>127</sup> Regardless of chronology, the importance of Gog and Magog and the connection between the Byzantines and the Romans serve to highlight the importance of myth in identity construction in the Syriac texts.

As mentioned above, according to the *Christian Legend*, Alexander inscribes a prophecy on a gate in the Caucasus. The vivid images and emotional impact of this eschatological inscription is compounded by an apocalyptic vision of god in battle; as Alexander and his troops call on god’s help to defeat the innumerable hordes of Persians, “the Lord appear[s], coming upon the chariot of the Seraphim, and the watchers and the angels [come] before Him with

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and John Julius Norwich, *The Embassy to Constantinople and Other Writings* (London; Rutland, VT: J.M. Dent; Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1993). For more on Byzantine Imperial ideology and the continuum between Rome and Byzantium, see Robert Browning, *The Byzantine Empire*, xi-xxii and 12-14.

<sup>126</sup> Catherine Rubincam, "A Tale of Two "Magni": Justin/Trogus on Alexander and Pompey," *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 54, no. 3 (2005), 265.

<sup>127</sup> “[Historical periods] are not separated by clean-cut boundaries. They overlap, and features of the old and new worlds coexist for a time. So any particular date chosen to mark the beginning of a new age is largely arbitrary. One feature that distinguishes the Byzantine Empire from the world of the late Roman period is its Christianity... [though] this state of affairs did not come about all at once. There was a long transitional period.” Robert Browning, *The Byzantine Empire*, xx-xxii. Obviously, “Byzantine” is not the term used by the Byzantines themselves, it is a western and anachronistic term used to refer to a large, diverse empire based in Constantinople. For more on my use of the term when referring to a specific community, see above, page 42, n. 105.

praises;” his mighty presence scares the barbarian hordes and gives Alexander victory.<sup>128</sup>

Finally, in case the message has not been conveyed bluntly enough, the Persian king, while in captivity, divines the future using Zoroastrian magic. His oracle predicts exactly what Alexander inscribed on the gate: all kingdoms other than Rome will “be laid to waste” and the Romans “should stand and rule to the end of time, and should deliver the kingdom of the earth to the Messiah who is to come.”<sup>129</sup> The king then submits to Alexander and gives Persia over to him.

The *Discourse of Jacob of Serugh* is written a few years after the *Christian Legend*, and it seems to be a response to the *Legend*.<sup>130</sup> It contains many of the same stories found in the *Legend*, though it features more information from the *Romance* tradition. It also contains an even more descriptive and violent prophecy of the apocalypse delivered to Alexander by a messenger of god in a dream.<sup>131</sup> In this prophecy, more connections are made between Alexander and the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, especially Jeremiah.<sup>132</sup> In the dream, God’s messenger tells Alexander he should make peace with Persia and take Persian territory. The messenger also goes into great detail about all the horrible things that will happen during the apocalypse; in addition to famine, pestilence, world war, and the unleashing of the unclean nations, the prophecy also forecasts the coming of the Antichrist. The work ends with this prophecy and interprets the books of Jeremiah and Isaiah to imply that god will destroy the earth after the Antichrist appears and Gog and Magog wreak havoc on humanity. There is no mention of a final triumph of good over evil—just the end of history. The mythological narrative found

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<sup>128</sup> Pseudo-Callisthenes, *A Christian Legend Concerning Alexander*, 157.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.* 158.

<sup>130</sup> van Bladel, “The Alexander Legend in the Qur’an 18:83-102,” 188.

<sup>131</sup> For the English translation of the *Discourse* see Pseudo-Callisthenes and E. A. Wallis Budge, “A Discourse Composed by Mar Jacob upon Alexander, the Believing King, and upon the Gate which He made Against Gog and Magog,” in *The History of Alexander the Great, being the Syriac Version of the Pseudo-Callisthenes*, ed. E. A. Wallis Budge.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.* 167, 191, 193, 195-6.

in the *Discourse* attempts to give credibility to a very specific vision of the future by associating it with the historical figure of Alexander.

The message conveyed by these prophecies and oracles is quite shocking. In the *Christian Legend*, Alexander predicts Roman hegemony over the earth following an apocalyptic battle against the Huns, Persians, unclean nations, and other barbarians. The battle is framed in starkly religious terms. This is made clear by god's actual appearance in battle on Alexander's side in the *Christian Legend* and by the connection between Rome/Byzantium and Christianity that is present in both texts.<sup>133</sup> Furthermore, these narratives explicitly connect Alexander the Great to Byzantium through the prophecy about the victory of the Romans. Alexander inscribes,

So shall the power of the kingdoms melt away before the might of the kingdom of the Greeks which is that of the Romans...and my kingdom, which is called that of the house of Alexander the son of Phillip the Macedonian, shall go forth and destroy the earth and the ends of the heavens; and there shall not be found any among the nations and tongues who dwell in the world that shall stand before the kingdom of the Romans.<sup>134</sup>

According to this prophecy, the Byzantines are the descendants of Alexander the Great. The complicated genealogy of kings and empires that came between Alexander, the Roman Empire, and the Byzantine Empire is flattened by the prophecy into a simple, linear progression. The authors claim Alexander as one of their ancestors and make him their own by creating a myth that collapses time into an easily digestible narrative that glorifies the community and silences past failures. It is no surprise that the Byzantines of the seventh century used Alexander the Great's conquests as a medium for self-definition, because Alexander conquered the very same peoples and lands that the Byzantines fought against and over during the seventh century. The

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<sup>133</sup> The Byzantine Empire was deeply religious, especially in its imperial ideology. For more on the Christian nature of Byzantine imperial ideology, see Browning, *The Byzantine Empire* and Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*.

<sup>134</sup> Pseudo-Callisthenes, *A Christian Legend Concerning Alexander*, 155. The conflation of Romans and Greeks is a construction of the Byzantine world, not of the Roman Imperial world.

territorial components of the myth constructed by the Byzantines fits into Bell's description of the spatial aspects of myth;<sup>135</sup> in this case, the idealized territory utilized in the myth is a romanticized unknown borderland. The Byzantine authors use well-known geographies that are tied to biblical and apocalyptic spaces. They collapse time by connecting the distant past to the present through a common space, and they use actions within the space to tie Alexander to themselves.

The *Discourse* also includes Alexander's victory over the Persians and mentions his construction of the wall to contain the unclean nations. However, here there is no direct connection between Alexander's victories and the apocalyptic prophecies that follow. These connections are not as explicit as in the *Christian Legend*; however, as mentioned above, Byzantine imperial ideology drew clear connections between Alexander, the Roman Empire, and the Byzantine Empire. Although the prophecies in the *Discourse* end with a wrathful god unleashing horrible destruction upon a wicked populace, the triumphs of Alexander himself are not overturned or diminished. The Byzantine authors still create a triumphant narrative for themselves through Alexander, and the apocalyptic prophecy is not meant to be interpreted as occurring in the time of the text's creation.<sup>136</sup> Whether or not the prophecy of Alexander is meant to apply to the Byzantine present, the two Syriac versions of the Alexander narrative are stories that also happen to redefine or reinforce the identity of the authors who created them in the face of colossal change. They invent traditions by re-associating the Byzantine state with

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<sup>135</sup> Duncan Bell, "Mythsapes: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity," 76.

<sup>136</sup> This is evident from the amount of time that must pass from the story given by the author until the apocalypse. In *Discourse*, it is 7000 years, while in the *Christian Legend*, the chronology works out to apply to the very moment of the text's creation. For more on the connections between the prophecy in the *Christian Legend* and its interpretation as belonging to the time of the text's creation, see van Bladel, "The Alexander Legend in the Qur'an 18:83-102," 183-185.

glorious military victories of the past in the face of contemporary temporal weakness through a special relationship with god, thereby giving their community a privileged connection to god.

In both the *Christian Legend* and the *Discourse*, Alexander conquers the Persians and fights the people of central Asia (the Huns), Byzantium's traditional enemies up until the rise of Islam, the Arab invasions, and the later invasions of the Turks. The climax of both stories takes place in central Asia, which was the homeland of the Huns (according to the thinkers of late antiquity), who were busy invading the rest of the world at the time of the creation of these texts. The battles between the forces of Alexander and both the Persians and the Huns take place in the region that was also the borderlands between the Byzantines, Persians, and Huns. These lands were highly contested during the time the Syriac narratives were written. Alexander's conquest of them and his claim of dominance over the lands by building a giant gate on them extend the ideology of ownership of the border regions into the Byzantine present. The mythological narrative in the two texts serves to simplify the complex geography of Alexander's conquests. The simplified "borderlands," which is the setting for the *Discourse* and *Christian Legend*, is a much easier space to understand and transmit in a communal myth.

The Byzantine authors use broad strokes to characterize the peoples of the earth: there are the good, Christian, Byzantines-- represented by Alexander. Everyone else is the "other"-- characterized by inhumanity and opposition to god. However, once the connection between the Byzantines and Alexander is established, Byzantine self-definition is taken further than the "us versus them" mentality demonstrated by the broad characterization seen in the delineation between Christian and "other." The very act of Alexander's construction of a gate in the Caucasus to keep out unclean nations is an act of identity creation and border delineation. The non-Christian, "impure" peoples of the world (the Huns) are physically cut off from Byzantine

(and civilized) society until the end of time. The physical separation also implies separate identities, and this division is enforced through Alexander's gate by the will of god. As pointed out in the earlier discussion of historical theory,<sup>137</sup> Bell posits that a community's identity is fundamentally framed by "representations of themselves in relation to others. In other words, representation and recognition—of us and them—act as the mutually supporting scaffolds upon which national identity is constructed."<sup>138</sup> In the myths about Alexander's conquests of the borderlands, the "us versus them" dichotomy is constructed through the characterization of the Christian forces of Alexander and the non-Christian enemies he conquers. Furthermore, the separation between the Byzantines and the Huns is given undertones of religious purity through the association between Huns and the "unclean nations." The divinely mandated physical separation represented by the gate makes the self-representation against the "other" explicitly clear to readers of the myth. The simple "us versus them" conflict allows Byzantine identity to be easily understood and transmitted by silencing the complex issues of identity and communal loyalty that faced people in the Byzantine Empire during the seventh century, especially the people living in the contested borderlands that feature so prominently in the Alexander myths.

From examination of the Syriac versions of the Alexander narratives, it is evident that Byzantine authors used these myths to respond to the empire's seventh century crisis. After decades of war against Persians and invading central Asian nomads, the empire was weak physically and emotionally. Furthermore, the Byzantines had lost significant amounts of territory, and aside from an almost miraculously victorious military campaign carried out by Heraclius, the Byzantines saw themselves defeated again and again. Like their Jewish counterparts, the Byzantine authors viewed their communities as god's chosen people on earth.

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<sup>137</sup> See chapter 1.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid. 67.

After all, they were the stewards of the true faith! How could they reconcile defeat with their imperial ideology of being god's representatives of holiness and righteousness on earth? Some responded by reworking myths and reinforcing traditions in order to reshape group identity. Hobsbawm and Ranger write of this type of history: "The element of invention is particularly clear...since the history which became part of the fund of knowledge or the ideology of the nation, state or movement is not what has actually been preserved in popular memory, but what has been selected, written, pictured, popularized and institutionalized."<sup>139</sup> The stories in these texts are myths: fictional and invented. Alexander probably never inscribed a prophecy on a gate in the Caucasus about fighting an apocalyptical battle against Gog and Magog, nor did he fight alongside a physical embodiment of god. Rather, Alexander the Great, who in many parts of the eastern Mediterranean was considered a founding figure of Hellenism, of Greek and Roman civilization and as a conqueror of the lands and peoples who had defeated the Byzantines repeatedly during the seventh century, offered the perfect medium for Byzantine self-definition in the face of catastrophe. The Byzantine storytellers incorporated Alexander into their pantheon of heroic ancestors, and in doing so incorporated his triumphs over the Persians and Huns into their own history. The authors collapse time and construct an idealized, romanticized space through the apocalyptic and fictionalized treatment of Alexander's life and actions. This manipulation of time and space is done in order to construct a mythical history filled with victory over the very enemies who threatened their community's existence during seventh century, for as Hobsbawm and Ranger write about the connection between identity and history: "all invented traditions, so far as possible, use history as a legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion."<sup>140</sup> The myths written about Alexander by these Orthodox Byzantine Christian

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<sup>139</sup> Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, 13.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.* 12.

authors compress a complex narrative of cohabitation, of ethnic and communal diversity, or victory and defeat, into a simple, glorious story of world conquest and Christian dominance over the “other.”

## Chapter Four: Alexander's Identity Crisis: Persians and Alexander the Great

The Persian versions of the Alexander the Great narrative also come out of a context of social upheaval and uncertainty. The Middle East during the eleventh through fourteenth centuries was marked by political fragmentation and frequent warfare. In Iran, as in the wider Islamic world, there was no unifying or dominant power during this time period. Following the disintegration of the Seljuk Empire, the lands of the Persians were distributed amongst a few minor ruling dynasties, which constantly fought each other. In addition to the fragmentation caused by almost continuous warfare between the many shahs and beys who ruled small pieces of Iran, the Mongol invasions constituted a crisis for Persians who inhabited Iran. At the time of the Mongol invasions, aside from being politically heterogeneous, Iran was also socially and linguistically fragmented. Various Turkish tribes had moved into Iran and had even ruled over Persians in various kingdoms.<sup>141</sup> Iran had seen several dynasties rise and fall since the death of Alexander; however, most were Persian in origin. Not unlike the Macedonian conquest of Persia and the rule of Alexander's Hellenistic successor states, the arrival of the Mongols constituted a major foreign, destructive conquest of Iran.<sup>142</sup>

The Mongol invasions of Iran occurred in the 1220s, and by 1258 the Mongols had toppled the last Abbasid caliph and sacked Baghdad. The effects of the Mongol invasion were calamitous for both the lands and people of Iran. Stories of mass slaughter were commonplace;

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<sup>141</sup> For example, the Seljuks were of Turkish origin. For more on early Turkish-Iranian interactions, see Gene R. Garthwaite, *The Persians* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), chapter 5.

<sup>142</sup> Although there had been several major non-Persian powers that ruled Iran between the death of Alexander and the Mongol invasion, the effects of these foreign rulers differed considerably and were thus historicized differently by Persians themselves and by others as well. "Unlike the Arab conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries, which brought a new religious and social order, or the Seljuk expansion in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, which invigorated the existing Islamic institutions, the Mongol invasions appeared to have little purpose other than conquest and destruction." William L. Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004), 34. "The Mongol invasions were an unparalleled cataclysm for the lands of Iran. Where the Arabs and Turks had been relatively familiar and restrained conquerors, the Mongols were both alien and wantonly cruel." Michael Axworthy, *A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 100.

everyone who resisted saw their people massacred and cities burned. Aside from the large loss of life, the Mongol invasion brought social upheaval as the land was laid to waste and taxes were raised.<sup>143</sup> In the face of such disorder and turmoil, how did Persians find meaning in their subjugation? Like the Jewish and Orthodox Byzantine authors, many Persians felt they needed to explain their own defeat at the hands of outsiders. Like the Jewish and Orthodox Byzantine authors, many Persian communities saw their victorious enemies as inferior to themselves. In this time of crisis, the group of Persians who wrote the *Iskandarnamah*, like earlier groups of Jews and Byzantines, turned to the figure of Alexander the Great to reshape their history and alter their communal myths in order to construct a more triumphant past upon which to (re)construct their vision of a unified Persian identity.

In this section, I will examine one specific text about Alexander, the anonymous *Iskandarnamah*, which was probably based on earlier versions of the *Alexander Romance*. It entered the Persian corpus through a translation of the Syriac, and it also built on the traditions of earlier Persian works about Alexander.<sup>144</sup> The Persian stories about Alexander the Great come out of the tradition of Pseudo-Callisthenes and the *Alexander Romances*. The *Iskandarnamah* was most likely written sometime between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries; the earliest possible date of its creation is 1030, because of a reference to the death of the Seljuk Sultan

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<sup>143</sup> “In some parts of the region agriculture never recovered... Where there had been towns and irrigated fields, the war horses of the conquerors and their confederates were now turned out to graze. Wide expanses of Iran reverted to nomad pastoralism... Peasants were subjected to taxes that were ruinously high... many fled the land or were forced into slavery...” *ibid.* 103.

<sup>144</sup> The translation of the *Iskandarnamah* I use is Mino S. Southgate and Iraj Afshar, *Iskandarnamah: A Persian Medieval Alexander-Romance*. This text should not be confused with another Persian text about Alexander the Great, also called the *Iskandarnamah*, which was written by the great Persian poet Nizami in the twelfth century. For an important critique of Southgate’s translation and editing efforts, see the helpful review by James R. Russell, “Review of *Iskandarnamah: A Persian Medieval Alexander-Romance*,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103, no. 3 (1983), 634-6.

Mohammed.<sup>145</sup> The poem is extremely long and repetitive; the surviving manuscripts are lacuna-filled and unfinished. According to Southgate, “the author or compiler intended the romance for a general audience,” and in this respect the Persian *Iskandarnamah* is similar to many of the other texts examined in this paper.<sup>146</sup> Like the other Alexander narratives from the tradition of the *Alexander Romances*, the story is filled with fantastic and mythical stories barely related to the accepted historical accounts of Alexander’s life. Indeed, one could say its authors give Alexander an identity crisis—he is no longer portrayed as Macedonian and pagan. Instead, he is Muslim and Persian! However, despite the ahistorical nature of the text, the *Iskandarnamah* offers insight into some Persian responses to the turmoil and upheaval that characterized the twelfth to fourteenth centuries in the greater eastern Mediterranean. Once again, we see the invention of tradition at work; as White writes,

[T]he difference between ‘history’ and ‘fiction’ resides in the fact that the historian ‘finds’ his stories, whereas the fiction writer ‘invents’ his. This conception of the historian’s task, however, obscures the extent to which ‘invention’ also plays a part in the historian’s operations.<sup>147</sup>

As with the Jewish and Byzantine interpretations of Alexander the Great, these Persian inventions aim to create group cohesion through historical representation.

How did the *Iskandarnamah*’s portrayal of Alexander the Great attempt to alter the identity of the communities that created the poem, and how did this shift demonstrate a response to the catastrophes of the Mongol invasions? The two major factors in the text’s reinterpretation of the Alexander narrative which attempt to shape a unified Persian identity and the community’s

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<sup>145</sup> For Southgate’s discussion of the chronology of the text, see Southgate and Afshar, *Iskandarnamah: A Persian Medieval Alexander-Romance*, 2-3; Stoneman and Southgate seem to lean towards the later dates in the fourteenth century. For connections between the *Iskandarnamah* and other Persian works about Alexander, see Southgate’s Appendix I, and Stoneman, *Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend*, 38-39. For more on Sultan Mohammed, see Axworthy, *A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind*, 100.

<sup>146</sup> Southgate and Afshar, *Iskandarnamah: A Persian Medieval Alexander-Romance*, 3.

<sup>147</sup> White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, 7.

relation to the invading Mongols are 1) the characterization of Alexander as the ideal king and as a legitimate Persian ruler, as opposed to Macedonian usurper, and 2) the portrayal of Alexander as a devout Muslim conqueror and leader. The Persianization and Islamicization of Alexander allow these authors to claim Alexander as their own and to incorporate his deeds into their history. It also created a sharp contrast between the Persian and Muslim Alexander with the barbarian and infidel Mongols. Like the Byzantine authors of the seventh century, these Persian authors use Alexander's victories to construct a mythical past filled with triumph over their contemporary enemies. In the *Iskandarnamah*, some of the enemies that Alexander conquers are thinly veiled references to the Mongols/Huns-- the enemies of the society that created the text, which is a strategy mirrored in the Byzantine *Discourse* and *Christian Legend*.<sup>148</sup> In this manner, the authors create a "historical" narrative of triumph over the powers that now subjugate them, in order to reshape their traditions to respond to "rapid transformation of society" which challenged the previous traditions.<sup>149</sup>

The Persianization of Alexander in the *Iskandarnamah* is noticeable almost instantly; the authors introduce a story that makes Alexander the son of a Persian king instead of the son of Phillip, king of Macedonia.<sup>150</sup> According to the *Iskandarnamah*, Phillip sends his daughter to marry Dara, king of Persia. Dara has sex with her and impregnates her, but later sends her back to Macedonia before he knows she is pregnant because she has bad breath. Upon her return to Macedonia, Phillip conceals the origin of the child and claims it as his own in order to save the

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<sup>148</sup> As in the Byzantine Syriac narratives, the "unclean nations" are characterized as inhuman and as the "other." See for example, the description of the Zangis or other strange peoples who Alexander fights and defeats in Southgate, *Iskandarnamah: A Persian Medieval Alexander-Romance*, 106. In the *Iskandarnamah*, Alexander conquers seemingly endless amounts of strange peoples, and obviously not all of them refer to the Mongols. For discussion of the Byzantine strategy of associating the Huns with the non-Christian, infidel "other," see above, chapter three.

<sup>149</sup> Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, 5.

<sup>150</sup> For a discussion on the various birth narratives of Alexander in the *Romances*, see Stoneman, *Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend*, 6-31.

honor of his house and daughter. Meanwhile, Dara has another child, Darab (Darius), with his new queen. Therefore, Alexander and Darius, the Persian king who he defeats, are half-brothers, and Alexander is the first-born son and therefore legitimate ruler of Persia.<sup>151</sup> The remainder of the story about Alexander's conquest of Persia and struggle against Darius serves to portray Darius as an unreasonable and selfish king, who does not know what is best for himself or his subjects. He will not listen to Alexander's reasonable request to end the payment of tribute from Rum (here, Alexander's kingdom) to Persia and refuses to accept a truce offered by Alexander in which he would retain the throne of Persia as a client of Alexander's, even after Alexander has defeated him in battle and taken his family hostage.<sup>152</sup> Alexander, meanwhile, "ascended the throne and he conquered the world through justice. He established good laws, suppressed heresy, and put an end to all injustice. Mankind was gladdened by his justice and equity, which brought peace to the world."<sup>153</sup> The author of the *Iskandarnamah* sets Darius up as an unjust, irrational ruler and contrasts him with Alexander, who not only has the correct qualities to rule, but is also the actual legitimate ruler because he is the first-born son of Dara.

Needless to say, Alexander defeats Darius in battle, and it is with the death of Darius that the Persianization of Alexander is completed. Stabbed by his own generals, Darius finally recognizes Alexander as his brother, as he lies slowly dying in Alexander's lap. He tells Alexander to marry his daughter, to adopt his family as his own. Alexander, always the model for an ideal king in the *Iskandarnamah*, gives Darius a proper burial in a vaulted golden tomb.<sup>154</sup> Because Alexander is the son first-born of Dara, and therefore the legitimate king of Persia, the

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<sup>151</sup> Southgate, *Iskandarnamah: A Persian Medieval Alexander-Romance*, 9-10.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid. 11-13. Notice the Persian equation of Alexander's historical kingdom of Macedonia to Rome, or Rum. As mentioned above, Byzantine traditions commonly draw clear connection between Alexander and Macedonia, Hellenism and the Greeks, Rome, and then to Byzantium, despite the anti-Greek sentiments of their Roman ancestors. These Persian authors called Byzantium "Rum" as well.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid. 10.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid. 14.

people of Iran accept Alexander as their legitimate ruler; the nobles and elders of Iran say to him, “May you enjoy your father’s throne.”<sup>155</sup> Even Darius’s family takes to Alexander and he quickly assumes Darius’s place as head of the family and as the legitimate king of Iran. The *Iskandarnamah* goes to great lengths to portray Alexander as an archetype of the ideal king, putting in his mouth such lofty statements as, “I wish to go around the world to establish proper laws wherever I go, to induce kings to righteousness and leniency towards their subjects, to leave a good name wherever I pass, and to protect my subjects from injustice and tyranny.”<sup>156</sup> Thus, in the *Iskandarnamah*, Alexander is used as an ideal lawgiver and heroic leader figure. His legitimacy as ruler of Persia in the text comes not only from his birth narrative as son of Dara, but more importantly, from his characterization as ideal king. Throughout the narrative, Alexander is compared to Kaykhusraw, a mythical figure who is considered the greatest king of Persia.<sup>157</sup> The story also twists the birth narrative of Alexander from the traditional stories of Macedonian or Egyptian origin into one of Persian origin to legitimize Alexander as king of Persia. In the *Iskandarnamah*, Alexander appears as the liberator of Persia, who frees its people from an unreasonable and illegitimate tyrant. Through the Persianization of Alexander, the Persians authors of the *Iskandarnamah* claim him as their ancestor, assign his place in their governing myth as great Persian king instead of foreign conqueror, and therefore connect themselves to his identity as ideal ruler.

Similar to his Persianization, the Islamicization of Alexander the Great is an important characteristic of the *Iskandarnamah* that not only redefines Alexander’s identity, but also shifts how the authors’ community defines themselves. Alexander is portrayed as a devout Muslim

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>157</sup> For examples of comparisons and parallels drawn between Alexander and Kaykhusraw, see *ibid.* 53-54, and 65. For more background on Kaykhusraw, see n. 48. Kaykhusraw is one of the heroes (as is Alexander) of the famous Persian epic *Shahnamah*, the “Book of Kings.”

and is cast as the archetypical Muslim conqueror in the tradition of the Caliphs and later Islamic warrior-kings of the Seljuk periods. When Alexander fights the Indian king Porus, who features in many of the other stories born out of the *Alexander Romances*, he tells his troops, “God is on our side...for these are infidels, and if we kill them we will be *ghazis*.” When Alexander’s forces ride into battle, they cry, “*Allah Akbar*,” the traditional battle cry of the caliph’s armies.<sup>158</sup> After conquering Porus, Alexander, ever the magnanimous victor, offers to restore Porus to his throne if he converts to Islam and denounces idolatry. However, Porus declines because he is a practitioner of the religion of Jamshid, who was the first idolater according to Islamic tradition.<sup>159</sup> Through stories like this one, the authors of the *Iskandarnamah* create a clear distinction between Muslims and the infidel “other.” Furthermore, Alexander’s benevolent, righteous treatment of the non-believing king Porus stresses the characterization of Alexander as ideal king. The conquest of Porus is just one of many struggles which get framed in religious terms by the authors of the *Iskandarnamah*. As in the Byzantine versions of the Alexander narrative, Alexander’s struggles against the monstrous and mythical people from around the world take on the qualities of holy wars and wars of conversion. Throughout the *Iskandarnamah*, Alexander either converts a newly conquered group to Islam or kills them. He repeatedly uses the “names of god” as magical powers to fight infidels.<sup>160</sup> He travels to Mecca and not only devoutly performs the rituals of the *hajj*, but also purifies the *Ka’bah* by restoring the rightful heir to his position as chief of the city and cleaning the shrine of usurpers.<sup>161</sup> These are simply a few examples of how Islam finds its way into the *Iskandarnamah*; the entire

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid. 19-20, and n. 8.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid. 21, n. 10.

<sup>160</sup> Another example of a struggle against an uncivilized, exoticized people that gets framed as a struggle between the forces of Islam and those characterized as infidels can be found in Alexander’s fight against the Davalpayam, who have no shinbones and use people like horses— to ride around on them, *ibid.* 36-39. For the use of god’s names as magical talismans, see one example on page 35.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid. 40-41.

narrative is filled with repeated references to the *Qur'an*, allusions to the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, and Islamic folk tales.<sup>162</sup>

The portrayal of Alexander as a devout Muslim in the *Iskandarnamah* is one of the most amusing ways in which Alexander gets reinvented throughout history. Not only did the historical Alexander associate himself closely with the pagan gods of the Hellenistic world, he also lived around 900 years before the revelation of Mohammed and rise of Islam! However, although extremely ahistorical, the Islamicization of Alexander serves to associate Alexander with the Persian Muslim authors of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries and represents him as an enemy of the non-Muslim Mongol invaders. By conflating the victorious world conqueror Alexander with Islam and therefore with themselves, the Persian creators of this narrative equate the Mongols with the many inhuman and unbelieving peoples which Alexander defeats and subjugates—not only attempting to reshape the governing myth of Persian identity and history, but also to create a subaltern myth—one which challenges the reality of the Mongol invasions.

The Islamicization and Persianization of Alexander the Great in the epic *Iskandarnamah* serves to reinterpret history in order to reassert one construction of a unified Persian identity in the face of crisis and defeat. The poem's authors incorporate Alexander into their history and claim him as an important, righteous conqueror. Despite his historical Greekness and paganism, Alexander is portrayed as a devout Muslim and legitimate Persian king in the *Iskandarnamah*. Additionally, the Mongols who invaded Iran in the 1220s, and who subjugate the Persians, are connected to the non-Muslim, non-Persian enemies who Alexander conquers. This initially subaltern narrative attempts to create Persian unity and opposition to the invading Mongols.

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<sup>162</sup> For example, Alexander's guide in the Land of Darkness on his search for the Waters of Immortality is the Islamic mythical figure and prophet Khidr, see *ibid.* 54-59.

Indeed, just a few years later, the Persians had “conquered the conquerors” and the Mongol rulers had adopted many Persian customs and had converted to Islam.<sup>163</sup> The narratives constructed by the reinterpretation of the Alexander narrative constitute part of the myths created by Persians in the face of the Mongol invasions. These myths allowed the authors to give their conception of Persian identity the flexibility and strength needed to withstand brutal physical subjugation. These authors assert their identity and superiority over the Mongols, and they also redefine Persian identity within their community. The *Iskandarnamah* is an example of how one group of Persians dealt with the threat of physical and cultural destruction at the hands of the Mongol invaders by reshaping their governing myth and communal identity.

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<sup>163</sup> Axworthy, *A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind*, 104.

## **Conclusions: Crisis and Identity (Re)Construction**

In periods of crisis, people tend to look to the past for reassurance and hope for the future. Especially in times of momentous and often catastrophic change, people reassess their identities and often reinterpret their history in order to define themselves. They seek stability in the past, though the manner in which the past is portrayed is not absolute. Nowhere is the fluidity of history more clear than in the examination of interpretations of the life and actions of Alexander the Great. The Jews of the Roman Imperial period, Byzantines of the seventh century, and Persians of the twelfth through fourteenth centuries all faced subjugation at the hands of foreign powers. Many groups in all three communities, to some extent, viewed themselves as superior to their new overlords: this superiority was engrained in fundamental religious and political issues of self-definition. In order to reconcile their newfound subjugation, these groups reinterpreted their past and redefined their relationship with the power that had defeated them.

How does Alexander the Great fit into these attempts at redefining identity through the reinterpretation of history? The importance of Alexander as a global and increasingly historically distant figure allows many groups the opportunity to claim him and incorporate his actions into their historical narratives in different ways. Alexander's role as a hero-figure allows him to be easily integrated into myths. Communities draw on his reputation as city-founder, heroic traveller and explorer, and ideal leader and lawgiver in order to create myths that Bell argues compress the complexities of history into an easily digestible and transmittable story that glorifies the community appropriately.<sup>164</sup> The Jewish authors use Alexander's reputation as founder of Hellenism and as the prototype for Greco-Roman kingship to reinterpret their plight

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<sup>164</sup> Bell, "Mythscape: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity," 75-6.

as subjects of foreign powers. The Byzantine authors, seeing themselves as the inheritors of both Greek and Roman traditions, adopt him as an ancestor and incorporate his victories into their own invented tradition. One group of Persians alters the birth narrative of Alexander in order to turn him into a Persian, and they make him the ideal king and Muslim in order to turn him from a prototype of Persian defeat into a prototype of Persian victory. These alternate narratives about Alexander are also constituent parts of myths, both subaltern and governing, constructed to deal with change.

The approach of each group is to partly explain away their subjugation by attempting to justify it. The Jewish texts make Alexander a just king and attribute many beneficial actions to him, taking away the sting of rule by foreign kings. Furthermore, the Jewish texts have god ordain Alexander's rule over the earth directly, which gives power to the Jewish communities who claim the Jewish god as their own. In addition to the interpretation of Alexander's story as a direct metaphor for the story of the Byzantine Empire, the Byzantines use prophecy to frame their social, economic, and political collapse as part of a divinely mandated apocalyptic narrative. The Persian authors deny the subjugation imposed by invading Mongol armies by taking away the historical prototype for a foreign world-conqueror who topples Persian empires. Bell argues that the temporal dimension of myth "denotes a historical span, a narrative of the passing of years, and it is a narrative that is most likely to include *inter alia* a story of the origins of the nation and of subsequent momentous events and heroic figures."<sup>165</sup> All three groups create myths that play with the temporal dimension of history in order to flatten history into a linear, teleological narrative that privileges their communities. All three communities also play with the spatial dimensions of history in their myths. The Jewish authors invent Alexander's

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid. 75.

journey to the most important location in their Jewish consciousness, the temple in Jerusalem. This fictional journey places Alexander at the symbolic heart of their Jewish identity, and his actions in Jerusalem take on added significance because of the holy setting. The Byzantine and Persian authors both set their myths in an idealized, romanticized border region, which allows the construction of a dichotomous opposition between the communities and the “other,” which for both sets of authors are non-believing Huns. The myths constructed by all three groups simplify complex relationships and history by altering their depictions of time and space. The resulting creations turn complicated representations of the past into easily digestible and transmittable narratives and place the community in a valorized and privileged position in history.

Additionally, all three groups use their interpretations of the Alexander the Great narrative in order to subversively assert their superiority over their overlords. The Jewish authors take the agency for Alexander’s conquests and achievements away from Alexander and pagan gods and transfer them instead to their own god by inventing subaltern myths. They also have Alexander convert to Judaism and treat the Jews differently than their neighbors. The Orthodox Byzantine Christian authors have Alexander prophesize about the fall of Persia and the other unclean nations, and the ultimate global domination of their own empire. They capitalize on the story that Alexander conquered the people and lands that were responsible for Byzantine decline in the seventh century. The Persian authors turn Alexander into one of them, just as they eventually do with the invading Mongol armies. Like their Byzantine counterparts, they too rewrite history to attribute glorious victories over contemporary enemies to themselves through Alexander, and in doing so, invent new traditions for themselves.

While the narratives about Alexander created by groups of Jews, Byzantines, and Persians stray from the “historical” accomplishments of the Macedonian conqueror, they still offer insight into the communities that created them. Through examination of their treatment of Alexander and his actions, the ways in which these communities reshaped history and their own identities are evident. Exploration of these texts demonstrates that communities use myth to, as Bell states, “flatten the complexity, the nuance, the performative contradictions of human history; it instead presents a simplistic and often uni-vocal story.”<sup>166</sup> In doing so, they create a narrative that is easy to understand and perpetuate; a narrative that resonates emotionally with the community; and a narrative that places the community in an eschatologically privileged position in human history. That all three communities explored in this paper respond to social and political upheaval, to catastrophic change, allows us to glimpse identity (re)construction in action. Analysis of the many interpretations of the life and deeds of Alexander the Great clarifies the complexities of the intersection of myth, history, and communal identity.

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid. 75.

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